

# Chiloé

*A separate world*

by Ovidio Lagos

Translated to the English by Elizabeth Birks

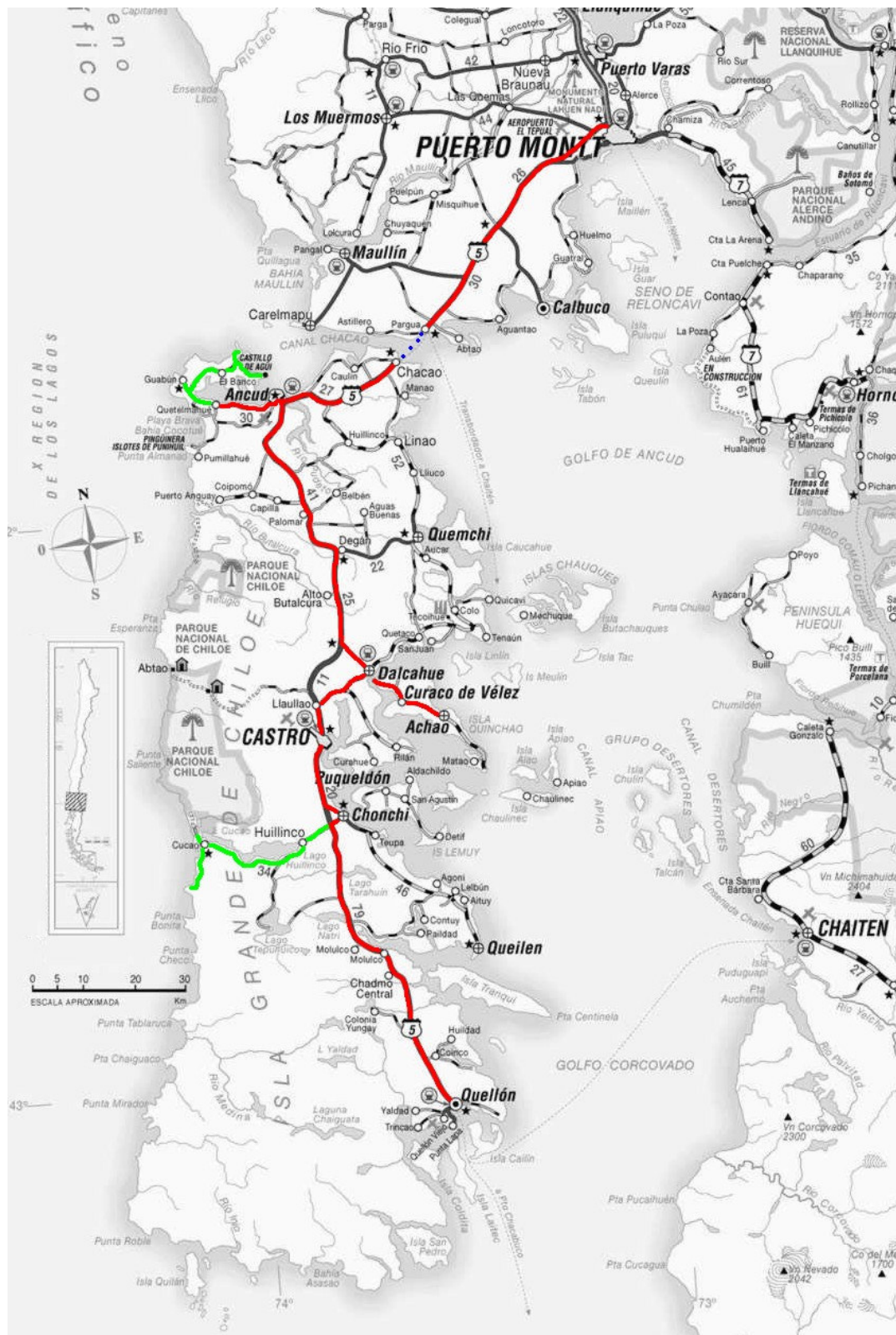
*To Juan José Osuna*

*Do we realize how far our town life and culture have got away from things that really matter, how instead of making civilization our handmaid to freedom we have set her heel on our necks, and under it bite dist all the time?*

John Galsworthy

*Introduction to **Far Away and long ago***

By W.H. Hudson



# FOREWORD

One might wonder why travel books, so fashionable during the late nineteenth century and during the century that followed would seem to be on the wane. I would not go so far as to say that it has become an exotic, endangered genre, but the truth is there are ever fewer travelers with the time to explore the world, discover new landscapes, get to know new people and portray their behaviors. This apparent lack of interest is no doubt due to a variety of causes. Culture is no longer the same, the immediacy of plane travel and communication means traveling has lost most - if not all - of its charm and, what probably makes things worse, one may very well wonder whether there is any place yet to be discovered. Conceivably some remote African or Asian village, but unfortunately no travelers are able to provide us with their testimonies.

Over the years the British have been masters in the art of travel journals - partly because nineteenth century naturalists were willing to embark on voyages of uncertain destination, without even knowing for sure when - or even if - they would return. The fact is many never did. Think of those men who penetrated deep into the heart of Africa leaving in their wake not only extremely valuable testimonies but their very lives. It was thanks to them we learnt of the existence of other peoples, of other totally unfamiliar worlds, where they faced countless risks. For nobody knew, for instance, that the “fevers” that shook them, later identified as malaria, were caused by a certain type of mosquito. It would be impossible to make a list of all those travelers, both men and women, who in the company of draughtsmen - for photography didn’t even exist - opened up a whole new world to us, giving us an entirely new approach to the world and revealing that our culture was not all that existed.

Also perhaps, man has lost that craving for the unknown, for searching out causes, for gaining insight into what the world was, or is, like. Nothing could otherwise explain journeys and polemics undertaken by eminent British travelers. The discovery of the source of the Nile, halfway into the nineteenth century, was a matter so absorbing as to eclipse wars and political intrigues. The controversy between Captain Francis Richard Burton and John Hanning Speke, sent to Africa by the Foreign Office at the time under the auspices of the Royal Geographical Society, as to who had actually discovered the source of the Nile, kept the whole of England on tenterhooks. In the light of our culture today, who could possibly care about the source of the Nile? To understand it we would have to be aware of the significance of discoveries in those Victorian times, which might equate with the existence of animal-life on Mars in our present-day world.

I must admit there have been travel books that left their mark on me, and whetted my interest in this type of narrative. I’d have to start by Charles Darwin and his prodigious *The voyage of the Beagle*, arguably unsurpassed in information, style and discoveries. It was here I first heard of Chiloé, in southern Chile, where Darwin spent the summer of 1835. But it would be unfair not to mention other writers, only

dimly recalled despite the fact they wrote during the twentieth century. Evelyn Waugh fiercely caricatured the British upper classes in all his novels; while parodying journalism (*Scoop*) and American cemeteries (*The loved one*) without relinquishing his travels round the world. Particularly revealing, as far as literary mastery is concerned, is *Ninety-two days*. Just imagine, for a moment, the sophisticated narrator in the early nineteen thirties, boarding this dilapidated old boat, crossing the Atlantic, and landing in Georgetown, then British Guiana, in tropical South America. The crossing, that lasted the ninety-two days mentioned in the title of the book, is something no modern-day writer would be willing to replicate. No longer are there passenger boats plowing across the oceans, or horses or canoes available to get to those remote locations. And what is worse, neither are there narrators willing to undergo such deprivation. Waugh, though, with acid humor and his own masterly style, delights his readers with that primeval experience.

It would be unfair, too, not to include Graham Greene, that perpetual traveler. *Journey without maps*, also written in the early 1930s, is an account of his journey across Liberia on foot. What use could maps have been to him there in the heart of Africa? But how useful was his vision of this world, and the way he put it into words. And before closing my homage to travel books, mention must be made of *In Patagonia*, by the obviously British Bruce Chatwin. Happily, this has become a classic read by thousands of people. This traveler had the guts, the perspicacity, and yet he suffered a variety of discomforts during his stay in Patagonia. But it is thanks to his journals we have found a particular dimension in this continent.

There are names that pierce one to the core, and then lie dormant, waiting for the right time to emerge. They flood our imagination with yearnings, with a spirit of adventure, even though we may be unaware of it. Yet the signals are always there. The very mention of them is enough to set a secret engine in motion, to make one feel the surge, however fleeting, of the impulse to conquer those mysterious latitudes.

This is exactly what happened to me with Chiloé, that island clinging to the shores of Chile.

Charles Darwin, in *The voyage of the Beagle* devotes several pages to Chiloé, at a time when the island was an impenetrable forest. The naturalist explored it by land and sea, and left testimonies that are a magnet to some travelers: the primeval strength of the sea, in Cucao; the string of volcanoes, crowned by the Corcovado, starkly visible against the horizon from the Chilean continent and the numerous islands of the archipelago, fascinating in name and topography. A brief look at the map will point to Detif, Dalcahue or Lemuy, curiously sonorous Indian names.

Chiloé's unique insularity also had something to do with it, for it gave it an inimitable quality, an identity of its own. In colonial times the island depended on Lima and not Santiago, and until 1826, it stubbornly resisted Chilean independence, openly preferring the Spanish monarchy; Chiloé was, therefore, condemned to isolation by the local governments. The fact that it was - providentially - colonized by the Jesuits rather than by the Spanish *encomenderos*, left a profound and indelible cultural and religious imprint which likewise contributes to the particular insularity of Chiloé today. Debate rages around the building of a bridge that will link it to the continent, but the fact is that the only way to get there is by sea, for there is no airport on the island - all of which contributes to its rich mythology with its wealth of major and minor deities, and a tradition of witchcraft peopled by demonic beings found nowhere else in the world.

I read, too, about the island heroes, its pirates, and eccentric wooden kings and queens. But these are no more than mere intellectual ornaments. What it actually

involved was going on a journey providing just the opposite of what today's adventure tourism offers, no exciting rafting, mountain climbing, mountain biking or horse riding at unforeseeable heights. Simply a journey like the one Darwin might have made, with curious eyes, and avid for knowledge, whether human, animal, geographical or historical. This is, in short, what a travel book sets out to do.

And if this is what you are seeking Chiloé provides all this and so much more. The climate can be grim at certain times of the year, the roads steep and stony, information - as we understand it - non-existent, food primitive and hotel accommodation almost precarious. But it is one of the most beautiful territories on earth, and its one hundred and forty larch-tiled churches are a constant delight to the eyes.

This snapshot should also include the people on the island. And I don't mean simply the peasants and descendants from the first colonizers, but people like you and me, who for whatever reason have left their cities, their families and their affections to settle in the remotest outposts of Chiloé.

This book is also about them.

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# THE LAST GLIMMER OF FUJIYAMA

Prejudice tends to be a poor travel-mate. Yet inevitably, as we set out for unexplored territories, the unfamiliar brings unknown fears and even frustrations to the fore, when our travels involve burrowing down into the core of worlds to some extent still primitive. Chiloé - an island in the south of Chile - harbors neither rage nor violence, which are common currency in South America; and not even the drinking water is contaminated, unlike Santiago or Viña del Mar. But there are - literally - other clouds on the horizon that can make a journey to the island ominous, the worst of which is the climate. Charles Darwin, who explored the island in 1834-1835, defined it as “detestable”, and confessed he was weary of so much rain. Which is surprising, for living conditions aboard the *Beagle* were far from comfortable. The naturalist slept on a hammock, had sharp differences of opinions with Captain Fitzroy, and bore the brunt of apocalyptic winds round Cape Horn and the Magellan Strait - the appalling *williwaw* that descended without warning from the mountains and could tear an unsuspecting sailboat to pieces. Yet, throughout his long journey round the world, all Darwin complained of was the weather in Chiloé.

One of the island’s arguable advantages is not having an airport, with the exception of a couple of tumble-down airfields allowing for the take-off of aircraft that fly over the archipelago carrying tourists avid to see it from the air. Few landscapes in the world are privileged with this blend of iridescently green mountainous islands, fjords, and a chain of volcanoes jutting out on the horizon, majestically presided over by the Corcovado that so impressed Darwin. Inevitably, you can only get to Chiloé by sea and, as we shall see, it is its very insularity and the rainy climate that have fashioned a curious identity among those who dwell there.

Little is known about the island and there are scores of people who are simply unaware of its existence. There are, on the other hand, those who suffer from a sort of map virus, obsessively scrutinizing maps and engraving rarely sonorous Chilote names in their memory. And to get there, just as in ancestral times, there is a sea to be crossed. The most usual way is to take a plane in Santiago down to Puerto Montt, an unprepossessing place, though the epicenter of the Chilean south. It is, for instance, the departure point for luxurious cruisers towards the most southern regions, something like traveling in a hedonistic bubble, with endless *pisco sours* and seafood, without the least contact with cultures of any particular nature. The cruisers normally stop off for a few hours in Castro, capital of Chiloé, just long enough to purchase forgettable crafts - or to go on a “five-hour” sightseeing tour, involving a tourist van packed with Europeans or Americans shuttled across from Puerto Montt to the island, with just enough time for a few snapshots which may some day become an excuse for conversation. But fortunately, not all of them find any allure in this hasty approach to the island and its culture. There are people who simply stay somewhere like Cucao to savor their discovery of a new world. There are many who cross over from Argentina,



mainly from San Carlos de Bariloche, traversing lakes and mountain passes to eventually end up in lake Puyehue o Llanquihue, which is almost equivalent to a mirage: this part of Chile makes you feel as though you were in Germany.

I drove into Chile in my own car through the *Cardenal Samoré* pass, named in honor of the Vatican mediator who avoided the war between Argentina and Chile towards the end of the 1970s. There is none of that spectacular character encountered in crossing the Andes between Mendoza and Santiago, those breath-taking heights and mountains stripped of trees. This pass is densely forested and has no winding mountain road.

Around lake Puyehue, in the spurs of the Chilean Andes, the climate that afternoon in late December was more than perfect. It reminded me of those postcards we used to get as children (nowadays supplanted by sterilized electronic mail) with sepia-colored Swiss mountains and stamps that helped to fill bulging albums. For there before me were mountains, forests and wooden houses with slanting roofs, Dutch dairy-cows and a multitude of permanently Germanic references. And, of course, a bend in the road brought into view a little house, which might have been the one Hansel and Gretel found in the woods, made of bread and covered in cakes and sugar, for the word *kuchen* was written clearly on it.

“So what kind of cake would you like?” the owner asked me.

In her drab fairness she looked like some aged walkyrie, a Brunilda or a Waltrauta, who had exchanged her lance and war-cry for culinary delicacies. The tearoom had only a few tables with flowered cloths, framed bucolic photos on the wall, suspiciously like those old-fashioned Swiss postcards, and cuckoo clocks whose cuckoos had, providentially, been silenced.

“You will taste the *Himmel* cake”, she decreed.

She returned with an oversize slice of cake, which could have been competing in a cholesterol festival: sponge cake filled with almonds and beaten cream. I asked for sweetener for my tea.

“Whatever for?” she asked in amazement. “D’you think it makes sense with the amount of calories you’re going to eat?”

I was soon to discover that in the south of Chile there was not only no sweetener but neither was there any kind of low-calorie culture. At a nearby table, two men were performing the tea ceremony as an unusual daily routine, eating not only cakes, but also toast, *kuchen*, butter, jam and sugar. What was in fact surprising was not so much this orgy of calories but that two men should sit down to have tea and talk business. How different from the ordinary corporate image! What might have been expected was the usual dry martini followed by a Caesar Salad to balance any excess calorie intake. I felt as though I was living in the years prior to the *nouvelle cuisine française*, before those tiresome Lyon chefs came to the ill-timed conclusion that traditional French cuisine was little less than the devil incarnate: three thousand calories was not unusual for a menu. And, of course, a premature pathway to the cemetery. But the south of Chile not only embraces creams and fats with enthusiasm, but often underlines the fact that *everything* in the world has become curiously *light*: food, culture, communication, vocabulary.

As you go further south, towards Puerto Montt, the landscape is resolutely determined to look European. You could be on a motorway in Germany, or in Austria. Yet summer resorts in Chile - all curiously finishing with the suffix *ar* - are dazzlingly, overwhelmingly contradictory. The ultimate contradiction is that the way into these places is through the back door, which is precisely the case in Frutillar, on lake Llanquihue, opposite the Osorno volcano, and in Zapallar, on the Pacific coast.

Chilean aristocracy, led by the three great families known as the Basque trilogy - Errázuriz, Larrain e Irarrázabal - discovered that the most beautiful cove on the Chilean coast lay 120 kilometers from Santiago, in a place called Zapallar, and promptly took it over. In the early years of the twentieth century they built palaces reminiscent of Central Europe, and the tiny beach is still one of the high-class strongholds. As in times gone by, nannies stroll along the flawless stretches of sand, caring for surprisingly fair children. Not even was Salvador Allende's left-wing government able to destroy Zapallar, with the terrifying threat of unionizing homes and hotels there. Elegant Chileans entrenched themselves there and literally continued to place stones on the path to Papudo to avoid *la canaille* overrunning it. Surprisingly, the first impression of Zapallar - or of Frutillar, for that matter - is the very opposite of alluring: there is the "high" town, plain, unprepossessing with unpretentious shop-fronts, but then, just beyond it, is the "low" town, close to the sea, gracious and refined.

The two men who discussed business over tea had already warned me not to be misled; they suggested I should simply ignore the ugliness of Frutillar Alto and carry on downhill to Frutillar Bajo, on the shore of the lake. What they failed to point out was the utterly foreign setting evoked by this South American branch of Lake Lucerne or Lake Bodensee, with its overwhelmingly Teutonic facades, and its Slav-featured population so set on talking in German. But this is no accident: the south of Chile has profound German roots and it was in the mid-nineteenth century that one man grasped the fact that there would be no progress without the crucial contribution of European blood.

This man, naturally a pureblooded German, was born in the very heart of Prussia in 1811. From early childhood Bernardo Eunom Phillippi showed a remarkable inclination towards Natural Sciences and, like others among his nineteenth-century colleagues, set off to discover the world. To make a long story short, suffice it to say he visited China, India, South Africa, but it was Chile that finally entrapped him, and gave sense to an erstwhile wandering existence. After a few comings and goings to Europe, in 1838 he settled in Ancud, the main town in Chiloé. Only a few years later, in 1843, he took part in one of the most resounding and fruitful epics in Chile, not least because it was carried out by only twenty men and two women. Perhaps because he had studied at the Naval School in Hamburg, he boarded the schooner *Ancud*, a sailboat no more than 46 feet from stern to prow, with the purpose of planting the Chilean flag - albeit after countless vicissitudes - in the Magellan Strait, thereby gaining possession over the area for this country until our times.

But Phillippi's ambitions went further: there lay the lakes once traversed by the Jesuit fathers, impenetrable forests and a generous earth with a wonderful future ahead - yet he knew the character of the natives. What could be expected from this mix of Spaniards and Indians other than slackness, apathy, and a want of objectives and enthusiasm required to transform the region? The land had to be colonized, not with *Mapuche* descendants but with Aryans from the German mountains. With a commission from the Chilean government he set off for Germany and 1852 brought the first 212 colonists, destined to change southern history forever. Phillippi, however, was not there to welcome them. He had been appointed governor of Magellan, the strait he had helped to conquer. One day he set out to explore the area and never returned, probably put to death by the Indians, for his body was never found. But in the south of Chile his name burgeons amazingly on streets and avenues, and no one seems to have forgotten him.

One should go back, perhaps, to the arrival of the Spaniards in the area in the sixteenth century, and the consequences of Catholicism and Hispanic rapacity, which in no time managed to wipe out thirteen thousand years of beliefs of an indigenous people, along with their economy. Too much blood was shed in the war between conquistadors and Indians, led by such memorable chiefs as Lautaro and Caupolicán, but Spain eventually subdued the Indians. Yet the Spaniards never populated the wide-ranging territory between Osorno and what is today the city of Puerto Montt, formerly known as Melipulli, whose native population had been decimated. Nor did the Republican government do so later, once independence had been declared. Towards 1845, during the administration of Manuel Bulnes, the Chilean territory had no continuity, for - as far as the population was concerned - it came to an end in Osorno. Which was, of course, extremely dangerous. Neighboring Argentina, or European powers such as England or France, might take over the territory, since it was a no man's land.

A series of judicious legal regulations set out the bases for colonization, thus averting any likely foreign threats. But, who were they to bring? Right from the beginning all agreed they should be European. English, perhaps, or Irish (who would have delighted the ecclesiastic authorities in Chile), but eventually it was decided they should be Germans. There were several important reasons for this decision - not least that Germanics are enormously organized and have an amazing capacity for solving problems. Once settled, they would stay on their lands, and it would never cross their minds to sell them and return to their own country with the money they made in the process. Bernardo Philippi and the Chilean government were not mistaken: there they have remained to this day. Lastly, events in Europe and the profound social upheavals unleashed in 1848 - which in France cost Louis Philippe his throne - paved the way for the exodus of thousands of Germans to the United States and South America, particularly to Argentina and Chile.

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century Germany was fragmented into thirty-nine kingdoms, as well as numerous principalities and independent cities. Some seemed to come straight from an operetta, with the inevitable castle, the royal family, and the requisite government officials who provided a semblance of order in the kingdom. Of course there was Prussia, not precisely an operetta kingdom. Or Bavaria, with the Wittelsbachs, that unpredictable ruling family, and a city like Munich that attracted artists and intellectuals. Yet things happened during those years that caused a Germanic exodus, from famine caused by crop failure, to democratic winds that found no echo in the ruling classes, who opted rather for relentless repression. This is no place to go into details about the limitations the law imposed on German citizens, or the havoc wrought by the industrial revolution. Suffice it to say that thousands decided to leave, most of them never to return.

Two large, clearly distinct, migratory waves reached Chile: those belonging to an illustrated middle class, with business skills and capital, who were compelled to leave Germany precisely because of the social upheavals, and chose to settle in the region of Valdivia. It is no surprise that in only a few decades they should have entirely transformed the city, with industries ranging from breweries to footwear factories. The second wave brought peasant farmers unable to bring with them more than a few tools, people who weathered the ocean on sailboats, suffering from cholera, mange or scurvy. And yet, they made it. And it was these people who settled in Frutillar - among other regions - towards 1850.

Let us imagine for a moment the surroundings in this place the Germans had chosen to make their homes in: it was densely forested and the land traversed today

by *Avenida Philippi* along the shore of Lake Llanquihue in Frutillar was no more than a swamp where no one could make their home - which meant they were forced to build their homes on the hills around it. There were no roads, and only a tiny sailboat made its way across the waters of the lake carrying supplies. They were entirely cut off from the world, and yet they enjoyed one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world. For, beyond the lake rose the imposing Osorno volcano, a perfect snow-capped cone accompanied by another two volcanoes known as Calbuco and Puntagüedo - not to mention the Tronador, in territory belonging today to Argentina, crowning the entire scene.

As might be expected, these Germans set to work, and over a few decades transformed Frutillar. The land was tilled; steamers sailed across the lake to Ensenada, Puerto Varas or Puerto Octay - all German strongholds. Water mills were built to grind wheat, and architecture was, *natürlich*, furiously Teutonic, so much so a tourist might even believe he had accidentally turned up in Prussia. Frutillar prospered, as did other townships that sprang up along the shores of Llanquihue.

Obviously there were Chileans who disagreed with the German colonization, particularly among the ecclesiastical authorities. The colonists were Protestants, which made them little better than heretics. And, to make things worse, Lutheran churches were built around the lake. But nothing could keep Frutillar from prospering and the coming of the railway, in 1913, put an end to its isolation. Houses were built along the no longer swampy shores of Llanquihue, schools and lyceums were erected, and, as was to be expected, the German Club was founded.

But theirs was a watertight world, where there was no room for Chileans, except as far as business and trade were concerned. Food, cooking, parties and weddings budged not an inch from German customs. Just as the queen of a tiny German principality decided on the most suitable prince for her daughter, so things happened in Frutillar. Consider for a moment the severity and shrewdness of those mid-European operetta-style kingdoms when choosing a suitor. A Wittelsbach wasn't bad, but on second thoughts, there was too much passion there, too much craziness, and persistent fatality in that family. Perhaps a Hesse-Darmstadt would be better, with that impeccable military discipline in anything they did. Or - *warrum nicht* - a Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, one of those who, from a hardly distinguishable German dukedom, had managed to ensconce themselves on the thrones of Belgium, Portugal and Rumania and, last but certainly not least, to include Queen Victoria of England in their heritage.

It was thus matchmaking mothers in Frutillar went through the list pondering on who was to marry Liselotte, most likely along the lines of Lady Bracknell, that delicious Oscar Wilde character in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, while she prepared her catalog of "eligible young men". A Winkler wouldn't be a bad choice, particularly in view of the number of acres they managed to amass from one year to the next. Nor would a Raddatz - after all, they were the first to have come to the region. Though, maybe, that Richter lad Liselotte gazed at with dreamy eyes was the most suitable, especially in view of his family's business expansion over the last few years. Yes, definitely a Richter. Then, the wedding at the Lutheran church, the reception abounding with marinated meats, sauerkraut, smoked pork, beer, the inevitable *kuchen*, all to the tune of Alpine music.

The undisturbed life at Frutillar, however, was rudely disturbed by the emergence of National Socialism in Germany in the early 1930's, and these paroxysms continued throughout - and long after - the Second World War. The strong commitment of some community members, and of pastor Ahlborn towards the Third

Reich brought unsuspected outcomes, most likely because these citizens of Frutillar never even dreamed of the atrocities that were to be committed by the nazi regime. They naively believed that Adolf Hitler and his movement symbolized the recovery of Germany's honor, left prostrate and humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles. There were many Frutillar inhabitants who therefore felt constrained to provide financial aid to their Great Germany, funds that would be sent to German institutions through a complex network of nazi party militants. Víctor Farías, in *Los nazis en Chile* (Nazis in Chile), points out: "Of the eight pastors in the Chilean Synod, seven were militant in the NSDAP - the German National Socialist Party: Otto Brien (Concepción), Friedrich Karle (Santiago), Dr. Schünemann (Frutillar), Hans Stöckl (Puerto Montt), Karl Steybe (Osorno) Theo Veil (Temuco) F. Zietschmann (Valdivia)". But in Frutillar nazi mysticism reached the peak of its expression in the fiery preaching of pastor Ahlborn, included in his book *Der Stützpunkt der NSDAP Frutillar*, published in 1933.

This *Deutschland über alles* had ominous consequences for some of the colonists' descendants. Chile and England had a traditional alliance that became even stronger with the start of the World War II; the Chilean government broke off relations with the nazi regime, and *black lists* were drawn up of people and companies who should be not be allowed to trade. This signaled the end of Frutillar in terms of business and trade. Too many prominent surnames were members of the NSDAP, and, among the companies placed on the black list were Molinos Frutillar, Richter y Cía Ltda and Weil Ltda. Hard years lay in store for the residents of Frutillar, who were not only used to bucolic landscapes, but to a peaceful, prosperous life where discrimination was non-existent. The punishment extended to the nazi members' families: they were not allowed to buy materials, finished products, or even basic necessities, until several years after the war had ended. Jorge Weil, in *Frutillar: pasado y presente* (Frutillar: past and present), paints a picture of those years: "It was only with the emergence of Western Germany that trading activities were resumed. On June 21, 1949, the new Chilean-German Chamber of Commerce and Industry was created. Things in Frutillar went back to normal".

As the years went by, Nazism was forgotten and wounds slowly healed. Yet another ruthless enemy was raising its head and threatening to destroy the ancestral family structure of colonists' descendants in places like Frutillar - and Chiloé: postmodernism.

Winkler Inn is simply another of the string of former residences recycled to be used as hotels, on the dazzling *Avenida Philippi* snaking along the shore of lake Llanquihue. It is, naturally, Germanic in style, and stands right next door to the Lutheran Church. From the main bedroom on the first floor, the view is overpowering. That evening in late December might have been termed perfect: the southern sky framed the Osorno, reflected flawlessly in the surprisingly still lake, where a single lonely sailboat stood etched, as though painted, against the windless sky. Just half an hour earlier I had heard an American tourist saying admiringly, while ecstatically contemplating the volcano: "*My God, it looks like the Fujiyama!*" And he was right: the view was surprisingly similar to that oriental landscape; but it also presaged an ominous portent, as though this were the last perfect day, the final sunset,

a mirage, an image of a world on its way to annihilation. Frutillar - I later heard - was doomed. Not because of natural cataclysms - though the 1960 earthquake had profoundly affected the area - but because of a culture that, year by year dramatically transformed it, with the risk of soon becoming a bygone.

Ilse Fuchslocher is the landlady - and heiress - of Winkler Inn, the heritage of a family emblematic to say the least, for Christian Winkler was one of the first colonists to settle in what was once known as Villa del Frutillar. The large house passed into her hands in the simplest fashion: in the mid-nineteen-fifties she married Rigo Winkler, whose parents had built this inn as their family home. I met Rigo on my first trip to the area, a sickly-looking man who passed away only a few months later. On my second stay, a year later, *Frau Ilse* was in charge of the business, on her own except for Silvia, a Chilean employee who carried out her orders. This in no way affected the inn, where everything ran as smoothly as a Swiss timepiece. And, just as in most Teutonic settings in the south of Chile, woodwork abounds. It is curiously different from run-of-the-mill hotels, for guests are lodged in former family bedrooms and at breakfast everyone sits round the large dining-room table. Even the lounge, though not large, seems to cling to the ghosts of other ages. The armchairs, the table and ornaments, the bucolic landscapes all suggest Ilse Fuchslocher has managed to maintain the atmosphere surprisingly well *en aspic*.

Actually, the whole of Frutillar seems to be kept in a sort of clear jelly. Dwellers are intent on preserving the area from any disturbing trend, any "harmful" fashion that might bring to an end what they consider peaceful coexistence. County authorities have therefore forbidden pubs so as to avoid nighttime brawls and youthful disturbances; nor are people allowed to practice jet-ski on the waters of the lake - at least on those closest to the town. The only vessels allowed on the water are tiny Laser-type sailboats. And should anyone even think of camping on the beach or dare to park a motor home, they will be given short shrift. With the exception of a branch of the *Banco del Estado de Chile* (Chilean State Bank), a building which might be in Zurich rather than in South America, there are no stores in Frutillar, not even a chemist's shop. If anyone needs medication, Frutillar Alto is the nearest place where they can get it. Internet communication is reduced to a bare minimum, for the only store opens when the owners feel inclined to do so, which means it is normally closed. And then of course, the two fire-engines must have been only recently imported from Germany, to judge by their design, and the sign on it helps to perpetuate this illusion: *Feuer Wehr*.

Throughout my stay Ilse Fuchslocher stuffed me with irresistible raspberry *kuchen* and crisp *apfel strudel* she had made herself, contributing to that daily festival of cholesterol. She was also intent on explaining to me why fires are the worst of threats in the south of Chile. In Chiloé, for instance, they are proverbial. I didn't really think the fact the houses are made of wood was an acceptable argument, for in that case it simply meant taking care the fireplaces and wood-fire ovens.

"The problem", as Ilse revealed it to me, "is in faulty electrical connections". If there are any old or badly installed wires in the walls - invariably made of wood - a short circuit, because of the sparks, will in most cases be fatal.

But there are other "short circuits" that have little to do with fires - those that can arise between the pureblooded descendants of the colonists and outsiders.

"My generation has always been very wary of Chileans, or any other foreigners who weren't Germans", she confessed to me one day. "But lately we've started including new German Catholic acquaintances. The surname of one of them,

coincidentally, is Winkler, though we're not related. Ah, but poker games are strictly between Lutheran ladies".

Ilse is fully aware of the fact that Frutillar is irremediably doomed - it was she, actually, who pointed that fact out to me in the first place. At any rate, that Frutillar belonging to the Aryan race, to the descendants of those first colonists, the Frutillar that normally uses the Germanic language.

"The young people eventually leave this place", she revealed to me one afternoon, while putting the finishing touches to the Christmas tree and setting round the gifts brought by the *Viejito Pascuero*, which is the name given in Chile to Santa Claus. "My son lives in Puerto Varas, twenty kilometers from here, and runs his own pub. My daughter didn't stay on either. And that's what happens in most families. The passing of my generation will mean the end of the old Frutillar.

Towards eight in the evening, in summertime, everything is in utter silence, save for the intermittent noise of a passing vehicle. There are few places where this profound lack of noise can be perceived, except, of course, in the heart of the Andes cordillera. Few people walk along the shore of the lake, and if they do, it is ever so discreetly.

"In winter, and especially on rainy days", says Silvia, the Chilean employee at Winkler Inn, "the silence is so penetrating that there are times I find it intolerable. I put on my cape and go to Frutillar Alto to hear voices and noises".

Perhaps it is precisely this - the silence and Germanic tradition - that makes young people leave Frutillar behind in their search for new horizons. The street running parallel to the Avenida Philippi - the only one, for beyond it is the mountain - houses an impeccably preserved icon of that culture, the German Museum, a sort of civic obligation for an outsider. It covers three wonderfully preserved hectares, donated - by the Winklers, who else? - to perpetuate the colonists' style of life. All the buildings - the water mill for grinding wheat, the stables, the main homestead - not only follow the typical lines of the time, but also treasure objects of days gone by - a washbasin, a hand-painted chest of drawers - as though clinging to a culture and economy in danger of extinction.

"We used to own five hundred hectares", says Ilse Fuchslocher. "Now we can hardly hold on to one hundred."

Agriculture has not proliferated among the younger generation, who embark on it from a strictly economical perspective, unwilling to make any of the sacrifices made by their forefathers, much less live in forests or fields devoted to farming tasks. There is too much excitement in the world around them for them to be tempted to live in "rural ostracism". Satellite TV, instant communication via cell phones, electronics and computing, have all sucked them up and away from any interest in keeping up the old traditions of those first German pioneers who journeyed across the ocean packed into the *Caesar und Helene*, in 1852, to make a new lives for themselves in a new world. Who would want to live in Frutillar, cut off from time, when there are places like Puerto Varas, also on the shores of Llanquihue and founded by Germans. For Puerto Varas is precisely the opposite of Frutillar: a typical example of globalization, with five-star hotels, noisy streets and a casino which might have come straight from Las Vegas.

And youth, or at least younger businessmen, feel little nostalgia for traditions. When the settlers came in mid-nineteenth century, they were provided with lands by the Chilean government, many of them along the banks of Llanquihue, on what is now the Frutillar bay. These are plots of around twenty hectares, which on the real estate market today are worth a fortune, and entice prosperous businessmen from

Santiago or Osorno to erect dazzling summer homes there. The younger generation of businessmen is therefore selling off these high-priced lands and buying up many more acres in the outlying areas of Frutillar. Historically speaking, they may be mistaken, for these lands belonged to their forefathers. Yet business-wise the move is brilliant.

The fate looming over this rare southern pearl is not imminent; new enterprises may well emerge to preserve its identity, or former activities could be recycled. Less than thirty kilometers away lies Puerto Octay, where the Teutonic illusion is particularly sharp: it could well be a Bavarian village. And what most contributes to this illusion is the Hotel Centinela, on the peninsula by the same name, stretching far out into lake Llanquihue. It is the best example of that culture *en aspic*, where no one would be surprised to find a dance tea, a chauffer driven Hispano-Suiza, men in tails and women in evening dress dancing a foxtrot on the terrace against the backdrop of the three volcanoes. As the Germans would say, *sehnsucht*, literally “the search for what was once seen”, or nostalgia (oh, the accuracy so characteristic of their language!), invades the Hotel Centinela. One of the rooms even displays photos of the Prince of Wales (who later became Edward VIII) and his brother, the Duke of Kent, when they stayed at the hotel in 1931, during an unlikely flight on a biplane, which later carried on to Argentina.

But all this is simply appearance, for the Centinela does not belong to Germans, but to a Chilean impresario and, as such, has been unable to avoid the inescapable summer marketing, apparent in the cabins facing onto the lake. In Frutillar, the cabins are less pretentious. Shortly before Christmas Ilse Fuchslocher went to the cemetery to place flowers on the graves of her loved ones - among them, a prematurely departed son - and that same afternoon I surprised her in factory worker attire, hammering away at a baseboard in one of the three cabins belonging to the inn. For her, life had to carry on, and so did her hotel, and she was preparing for her many European guests...

“In April”, she told me, “a couple from Germany sent a fax with a reservation for two days in December. They’ve just left”.

She stood in the living room, gazing unseeingly out onto the lake through the large French window.

“So many things can happen between April and December,” she sighed.

The evening I left for Chiloé, I had dinner at the *Selva Negra* restaurant, where I was briskly served by the maitre-cum-landlord. Here too the illusion persisted: the candles on the tables, delicately protected by lanterns; hand-painted furniture with floral motifs and a collection of tiny flying witches, emulating Calder models, all contributed to creating a curiously international setting. Yet I must admit I had the best *chucrut garnie* in my life, and the *flan de chirimoya con crema* was superlative.

As daylight faded, the Osorno took on a more dramatic and hypnotic appearance, as though intent on being reflected eternally in the lake. Yet it was not a perfect cone, for the steepest part of the crater was slightly lop-sided. Perhaps Ernst Lubisch had once passed by there. Perhaps this volcano was the inspiration for the hat worn by Greta Garbo in *Ninotchka*.

I somehow had the feeling this was the last illusion I would see. In Chiloé time had another dimension and there were no Swiss clocks to measure it. Nor was there a volcano reflected in a lake. German *pieces de resistance* and *Sacher* cake belonged to another kind of island: the one created by Bernardo Phillippi by inserting European culture south of Araucania. To the south of Chiloé, instead, was the Pirulil cordillera and the desolate southern islands bearing the brunt of the waves in the Pacific.



But that was a desolation rich in myths, wizards, shipwrecks and tales of pirates.

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## THE CITY AND ITS SHIFTING ANGLES

Pargua is, to some extent, the end of the Chilean continent. At least the end of the land, which despite its southern location, still boasts townships, beaches and roads. What stretches beyond, to the east of Puerto Montt is a fiercely rugged, inhospitable coastline, slashed by jagged, uninhabited fjords, and capped by volcanoes. Pargua is no more than a landing stage, across from Chiloé. The island's northern shore has none of the mountainous splendor to be found in the south, cut off by the formidable Chacao channel that struck such dread in the hearts of Spanish sailors when ships were still driven by the wind. The crossing can only be made on a ferry and no one would even guess the peaceful crossing could entail so many dangers for an unwary sailboat. In the narrowest part of the channel, two and a half kilometers across, currents can be as fast as nine knots, and daily tides register seven-meter shifts. Not to mention the extremely dangerous whirlpools eddying round barely submerged rocks where countless vessels have foundered. So terror-stricken were the Spaniards that one day they decided to set fire to the church in Chacao, which made it easier for them to convince the dwellers to move to San Carlos, where a fort had been built and which had a seaport of its own. Over time, the name was changed to Ancud.

However, the meteorological prophecy had not come true. As the ferry made its way towards Chacao, which in the language of the Chono Indians means *cove of tacas*<sup>1</sup>, the sky was gloriously clear and the sun beamed down on the Chiloé coastline. Of course, one couldn't help wondering why a bridge had never been built, seeing the distance between island and continent was no more than two and a half kilometers at its narrowest point. I soon learnt there were technical reasons, added to others which no doubt had the power of theological dogma.

"Just imagine, how could the foundations for a bridge be built with currents running at nine knots? How could divers withstand such a strong undertow?" asked a Chiloé-born passenger who lived in Castro. "Just imagine how strong the currents are that not even electricity is provided by an underground cable but by an overhead system.

In fact, the electrical towers could be clearly seen. But these were merely technical subtleties. The real problem was inextricably bound up in the history and identity of Chiloé. That remote island had never reported politically or administratively to Santiago during colonial times, but to Lima, in the Peruvian Viceroyalty. Chile viewed it as a sort of break-off, as though a cataclysm had cut it off, not only geographically but also culturally. And in the heat of the wars of independence, Chiloé remained aloof; what made it even worse was that the island dwellers were content to have the Spanish king ruling over them, and avoided helping

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<sup>1</sup> Shellfish

the Chilean revolutionaries. But in 1826 political tension became intolerable and the island was eventually made part of the Chilean territory. Punishment, however, was soon to come. Chiloé was isolated, as though it were lost in the expanse of the ocean, and had no cultural contact with the rest of the continent.

All this to some extent created for the island an identity of its own, rich in mythology and witchcraft. To fundamentalists, a bridge would destroy that unique culture preserved over the centuries. Hundreds of vehicles would overrun Chiloé every day, and the invasion would no doubt come hand in hand with some of the post-modernistic scourges: fast food stores, unavoidable environmental impact caused by uncontrollable sightseers, a proliferation of ugly motels that would put an end to the peaceful life on the island. For others, instead, the bridge would transform the island's infrastructure and economy, decades behind the rest of Chile.

Whichever the case may be, for the time being - and as far as I can see, for some time to come - the ferry is the only transport available to make the crossing. Chacao is no more than a landing stage and its tiny *plaza* is still the home to the two-spired church, just one more among the one hundred and forty churches on the island, all of which may be considered unique. In times gone by villages in Chiloé must have been unpretentious, to say the least. John Byron, grandfather of Lord Byron, foundered with his frigate *Wager* in the waters to the south of the island and spent some time in this territory. His comments about Chacao are revealing.

*It was three days before we arrived at Chacao, as the tides between this island and the main are so rapid that no boat can stem them. The same precaution was taken here as at Castro; we passed through a whole lane of soldiers, armed as I mentioned those to have been before, excepting a few, who really had matchlocks, the only fire-arms they have here. The soldiers, upon our journey, had given a pompous account of el Palacio del Rey, or the king's palace, as they stiled the governor's house, and therefore we expected to see something very magnificent; but it was nothing better than a large thatched barn, partitioned off into several rooms.*

It would be no overstatement to say that towards the south of Chiloé, the landscape becomes increasingly wild and overwhelmingly beautiful. The archipelago, with its melodious sounding island names - Linlin, Quinchao - is frankly due south. And at the epicenter of this world lies Castro, overlooking the blue waters of a fjord, with an allure of its own, particularly when compared to Ancud, on the northern coast of the island. You would be wrong to believe this city is built along visually pleasing lines. Quite the contrary, it is endowed with the monotony and simplicity of Chilean villages, its old, unprepossessing wooden homes arbitrarily painted. Yet, against the overall visual effect these shortcomings tend to fade.

The problem of the small islands around Chiloé is that there is little to see, save for a handful of categorical musts. The church in Castro, facing onto the *Plaza de Armas*, is one of these because the interior woodwork is one of the most beautiful, not only in Chiloé, but in the whole world. Walls, pillars, altar, carvings, arches contribute to a richly-hued explosion which has remarkably managed to survive circumstances almost apocalyptic in nature, ranging from a couple of fires caused during incursions by Dutch pirates in the 17th century, and yet another in 1772, to the worst earthquake in the history of Chile in May 1960. But apart from the church, the Franciscan convent and the palafittes on the Gamboa River - humble abodes mounted

on stilts - there is practically nothing to see in Castro. Yet its appeal lies not in what there may be to see but in the *climate* it conveys, embracing an incomparably beautiful fjord, old buildings, a nostalgia-laden port and an endless parade of backpackers from all over the world.

If hotel accommodation in Frutillar is precarious, Castro is not far behind. The only hotel built of bricks is *La Hostería de Castro*; erected where Casa Díaz, a Norman-style country home once stood; here one has no inkling of conversations or noises going on in neighboring rooms, unlike most Chilean hotels where the walls are no more than wooden partitions isolating neither noises nor any other demonstrations of high spirits; timetables for hot water, however, are absolutely unforeseeable. But what a pleasure to sit at sundown, savoring a *pisco sour*, listening to the strident caws of the *theriscus caudatus melanopis*, commonly known as bandurrias or ibises, that make their nests in a tree by the terrace, and looking out onto one of most beautiful vistas in Chiloé.

The day might come to a close dining at *Sacho*, on the first floor, also opening out onto the fjord. There the owner, *doña* Chabela, spends the evenings making every effort to ensure everything works out to perfection. The music that invariably accompanies diners ranges from *Tico tico no fuba* to *Raindrops keep falling on my head*. The night I went to what is perhaps the pleasantest restaurant in Castro, *doña* Chabela was having dinner with her guests at a table on the ground floor. And while she told of the way she had survived gambling a whole evening at the casino with a mere thirty dollars, she suddenly discovered I had ordered fruit salad and - much to her dismay - that I was being served the canned variety, which to her was little less than heresy. She got up and marched out of the restaurant. In no time she was back with a melon under her arm and a handful of peaches, and gave the order I should be given a proper dessert.

Right next door to the restaurant is *El Tren*, a bookstore under assault by the post-modernistic scene, from its décor abounding in pale wood and pastel colors to the titles it offers: best-sellers, self-help books, cook-books, Isabel Allende dramas, unbelievably expensive tomes with photos, and here and there a novel by Horace Lovecraft. All against the background of melancholic Portuguese folk fados performed by Amalia Rodrigues. When arriving in a town where you are not acquainted with even one of the inhabitants, a bookstore can be a good place to begin.

“You must meet Mario Contreras Vega”, the proprietress suggested.

It was then I discovered that Chiloé has drawn a variety of writers – one of whom is Contreras Vega - whose narrative is profoundly related to the land. They are inclined to writing about mythology, witchcraft, and the customs on the island, generally covering the costs of their own publishing. Oddly enough, representatives of the old South American literary school dating back to the early twentieth century are still to be found - Alcides Arguedas, in Bolivia; Ciro Alegría, in Peru; a school disdaining urban dramas and intent on narrating the existence and sufferings of those men related to the land. It was no easy matter to find Mario Contreras Vega in Castro: there was no phone number registered and all I was able to find out was that he lived somewhere on *calle* O’Higgins. But the bookstore owner had provided me with a revealing fact: on the writer’s balcony, which looked out onto the street, there was a sign. No sooner had I found it, I was able to make out the following words: “The bridge in Chacao, second colonization of Chiloé”.

At the end of a dark passageway that might have been leading to a warehouse a door opened up to the spacious upper floor, where Contreras Vega lives. But before going any deeper into this man’s world, it should be noted that a writer’s dwelling in

Castro has little to do with what one would expect to find in other parts of the planet. It is neither a tiny apartment in some European city, nor a country home where the writer works at a desk buried under books. In Chiloé, living quarters are particularly unassuming, and can even be disconcerting at first sight. A narrow passageway between wooden walls is often the usual path into the house. Facades and lobbies are not part of island culture.

Mario lives in a roomy first floor home, surrounded by gigantic photos of Che Guevara, Pablo Neruda and Salvador Allende. Some members of the Chilean left-wing, in particular those who suffered under the dictatorship of general Augusto Pinochet, found in Chiloé a space that could contain them, and provide them with a chance to start anew. Mario was not born on the island, but on the Chilean continent, in Coyhaique. But he came to Chiloé at the age of seven, and some time later married an islander dweller, becoming intellectually involved with this land, and writing about myths, witchcraft and pirates. His work seeks to fathom the incredible wealth of Chiloé mythology, with its gallery of mythic beings such as *El Caleuche*, *El Thrauco*, *La Fiura*, *La Voladora*, to name only a few. And, along the lines of Greek mythology, each deity represents a human conflict.

Writers may have found on this isle the component any intellectual requires, that indispensable isolation, a culture precisely the reverse of the urban, the psychology of island dwellers, the remoteness from globalizing trends, and a wealth of human, historical and geographical material to write about. And there are several who have lived or were born in this land, from Francisco Coloane - now dead, one of the glories of Chilean literature, born in Quemchi, north of Castro, where he spent his childhood - to Renato Cárdenas Álvarez, a first-line intellectual and writer, steeped in Chiloé myths.

It is remarkable that politically Chile still staunchly stands by its left-wing and right-wing inclinations. At times there is the unavoidable feeling that time in this land has stood still, that it hasn't been thirty years since the *Unión Popular*, the party that led Salvador Allende to power, was practically exterminated by general Augusto Pinochet's military government. Writers, intellectuals are still left-wing in the purest historical sense, independent of any changes that may have taken place in the world. Intellectual Chileans - along with other intellectuals - may perhaps have become stuck in a political rut, which no longer has a role in the world of today. But then, of course, it should be remembered that most of them were personally subjected to prison and ostracism, not always forgettable experiences.

Mario Contreras Vega belongs to the group of writers who were forced into jail, simply because of their ideas. He reminisces over it, while we chat around the kitchen fireplace, so profoundly significant in Chiloé culture, radiating warmth in harsh weather, and drawing together family and friends. Over 120 people were arrested in Chiloé, simply for belonging to the *Unión Popular*. This system worked on the basis of "squealers", informers, and personal revenge.

"No sooner had Salvador Allende's government fallen, in September 1973," he recalls, "I was arrested and sent to Puerto Montt, to the common jail. I was locked up on the ground floor, where political prisoners were crammed in together with common criminals. It was there I first learnt of the meaning of humiliation, the denial of human condition, the savagery of our military. Men of seventy were forced to do press-ups, as though they had the stamina of the younger ones. When, exhausted and winded, they gave up and collapsed, they were brutally kicked and made to start again.

Many were the horrors Mario witnessed while in jail in Puerto Montt. Fortunately, he was freed two years later, having refused to bow down to his captors. Anybody else under arrest would, no sooner free, have rushed headlong out into the street, anything to get away from that hall of horrors. Mario, instead, took his time.

"I demanded they pay the bus back to Chiloé," he told me. "To the astonishment of my jailers, I went even further." I never asked to be brought to Puerto Montt` way his dignified retort.

And he managed to make his captors, his enemies, pay for his return home.

Writers in Chiloé attempting to publish their work, lack those essential tools normally available in large urban hubs. In Castro there are no publishers, nor do people have the resources - or the energy - required to travel to Santiago and exercise influence on publishers and newspapers. Works that do get published are funded by their authors. As would be expected, they are limited editions, not part of the distribution and advertising circuit. One exception was Francisco Coloane - born in what was at the time a timber-workers' village in the north of the island - because he lived in Santiago where he was a reporter, and was thus able to relate to the world of publishers. An exceptional storyteller, worthy of note, who could well have taken his place among the greats in Latin America.

And, if it is Chilean writers we are talking about, Chiloé was not aloof from them. In Chilean intellectual circles, having left-wing inclinations was practically a must during the second half of the twentieth century. Poet Pablo Neruda and José Donoso were the best examples. I met Pepe, as Donoso was affectionately known, in Buenos Aires in mid 80's and discovered in his delightful conversation a man not only talented but with a very particular sense of humor. He belonged to one of the great Chilean families, which did not stand in the way of his taking the path of exile at the time of Allende's deposal. What connection could there be between Chiloé and this man from the Santiago upper class, who had lived in Europe and had written such memorable works as *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (The Obscene Bird of Night)? What bond could link this unequivocally worldly man with the modest inhabitants of an island at the southernmost ends of the earth? Actually, quite a lot.

True unto himself and his ideals, he took part in a demonstration in Castro towards the middle of the 80s, just when the Chile government had decreed a state of siege. Simply because of his beard, José Donoso, the great Chilean writer, that man of letters recognized all over the Hispanic-speaking world, that Santiago aristocrat, was arrested and thrown into a cell at the police-station in Castro, where he shared the tiny space with several other prisoners. But he was recognized - and someone gave the word. It was not long before prominent Santiago politicians were on the phone to Castro to have José Donoso freed immediately. What an international disgrace! How could a writer of his stature be imprisoned simply because of his beard? The whole affair had to be hushed up. Imagine the surprise of his jailers when they received a call from the Spanish Prime Minister requesting his release. The doors to the cell were opened wide. But José Donoso had his principles, and he was adamant.

"I'm not leaving this cell till the rest of these men are set free."

After several skirmishes, he gained the upper hand. All those under arrest for having taken part in the demonstration were allowed to go.

The words used to describe Mario Contreras Vega as a writer a few decades ago would have been "staunchly committed", meaning that his writings and his thoughts were unswervingly linked to his surroundings and his time. Foreigners regularly stop off at his home in Castro, particularly anthropologists in search of the cultural roots of native Indians. Mario, like most of the people living in Chiloé, often

spends the weekend away from the township. These people make their way to some far-off hillside, a modest wooden cabin, perhaps surrounded by apple-trees; or to the *bordemar*, where they stay somewhere along the seafront. Mario's refuge is the untamed, deserted northern shore of the Huillinco Lake, where a wooden lodge is just perfect to get away from Castro for a time. It is there he comes in contact with local farmers, their customs, and the tales they have to tell.

"You shouldn't believe everything these farmers tell you," says Mario. "They are inveterately prone to making things up. Some time back I had a visit from a Spanish anthropologist who wanted to contact *Huilliche* descendants, because he was seeking deeper insight into their culture. I naturally put him in touch with a highly picturesque fellow who lives close to Lake Huillinco."

The researcher set off with his professional tape recorder. The result was a long-drawn-out conversation where the peasant recounted experiences of his own and of others, ranging from encounters with fantastic beings to episodes extraordinary to the occidental eye. He returned to Castro overjoyed with the material he had been provided with, and made Mario listen to it. The writer listened, sunk in silence, robbed of words.

"I realized that all the peasant had told him were yarns - without a bit of truth in them, something quite typical among the rural class in Chiloé. Actually," he confessed, "I had a bit of problem with my conscience. How could I tell my Spanish friend none of all this was true? In the end I just let it ride - let him carry on believing in the magic."

It is understandable that writers living in Castro should be fiercely against the building of a bridge between the island and the continent. So profound are their convictions, so great their fear of the cultural identity of the natives of Chiloé being devastated - though already greatly influenced by the new economy introduced by the salmon-fishing industry -, so entrenched their dread of that insular paradise becoming just another stronghold of globalization and vulgarity, that they have started a protest movement. Mario Contreras Vega's balcony overlooking O'Higgins street has an immense placard announcing "NO" to the Chacao Bridge. Intellectuals are aware of what it would imply - the mass influx of tourists, the impact at environmental level, and the drastic changes in customs and traditions - an inevitable process that will in no way benefit the natives of Chiloé. It would, instead, lead to the island losing what for so many centuries it has managed to keep to a large extent untouched.

In his conversation Mario uses dialectics, and it is a pleasure to listen to him. Everything has a cultural explanation, and culture is the most precious belonging. I would have stayed on chatting with him, for it is no easy matter to encounter abstract thought in these southern regions. But his wife suddenly burst into the room.

"There's an emergency," she told him, concerned.

Mario got to his feet as if he had seen the devil himself and brought the conversation to an end.

"I must go," he apologized.

Fire is the worst enemy to people in Chiloé, for just about everything is built of wood, and fires break out with unusual frequency. And writers in Castro are also often volunteer firemen.

Santiago de Castro was founded in 1567. Despite its strategic location in the heart of the island, for several centuries it continued to be an unspectacular village

lost in the midst of those southerly confines, strategically insignificant. But the European political checkerboard towards the end of the sixteenth century was to place the lost land of Chiloé on the map, and Castro was to be the victim of a particularly virulent attack by Dutch pirates, which brought with it features both tragic and novelesque. What could bring an unexceptional Spanish village on the Pacific, entirely isolated from the Chilean continent, with one of the worst climates in the world, to the attention of the European powers? The simple fact is that Spain and Portugal, which had so far dominated the seas, dividing up the world in the Tordesillas Treaty, were suddenly confronted with rival seafarers: England and Holland. And it was this tiny latter kingdom that would try to checkmate the great Catholic power in these seas. Skilled merchants and highly accomplished ship designers, as well as experienced seamen, the Dutch became an ever-increasing menace.

By today's standards, what motivated Holland is almost incomprehensible. Religious wars between Catholics and Protestants, capturing and destroying fortresses beyond the seas, pillaging to finance their expeditions, and slaying Spaniards were a few of the main reasons. But there was one burning attraction that blinded governors and pirates alike: the islands of spices, the legendary Moluccas, whose produce was cherished even more than gold. A bag of peppercorns cost more than a bag of precious metals. There were two ways to get to these coveted islands: by the Cape of Good Hope or by the Magellan Strait. And it was in this connection Chiloé took on unsuspected relevance, precisely because it was inevitable that vessels coming through the strait and into the Pacific should come upon this primitive isle, isolated and able to provide excellent timber, water and seafood in abundance.

In 1598, therefore, a powerful expedition set sail from Gorea, a port close to Rotterdam; the expeditionary force, commanded by Jacob Mahu, was made up of five vessels camouflaged to look like merchant ships. Needless to say this undefeatable task force suffered all the nautical horrors of the time: storms, diseases, deaths, loss of course, dispersal (so significant that one of the vessels turned up on the coasts of Japan), particularly as they approached these southern waters. But, to make a long story short, suffice it to mention that one of the vessels, *Fidelidad*, under Baltasar de Cordes, arrived in "Chilhué", as the island was known at the time. She limped towards the northern coast of the island and her crew, hungry and exhausted, landed on what is now the Lacuy peninsula. The vessel carried on board in a high-ranking position, a man known as Antoine El Negro, one of the most bloodthirsty pirates of the time, which proves the expedition was all but peaceful.

The Dutch remained in the area for six months, recovering from the hardship of their voyage, but above all, manipulating skillful intrigues with the Indians. The mere fact of the newcomers being enemies of the Spaniards inflamed the natives to the point of revolt. What an efficient way to be rid of Hispanic *encomenderos*<sup>1</sup> and governors, who had subdued them thirty years previously. And if five thousand Mapuche Indians were at the time threatening Osorno, why should they be subservient? It was their great opportunity and fate had placed these seamen in their path. It is, of course, worth mentioning that *Fidelidad* was a 220-ton vessel with eighteen pieces of artillery and a less than contemptible offensive power. Pirates and natives, therefore, plotted to take over Castro and annihilate the Spaniards.

And so it was that one morning in April *Fidelidad* sailed into the beautiful Castro fjord, its colors flying, and a bugle blowing. The authorities were bewildered:

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<sup>1</sup> Spanish colonists granted rights over Indian laborers by royal decree



they knew Dutch ships were sailing along the eastern coasts of Chiloé and, wary of their intentions, had reinforced the city ramparts. The *Corregidor*<sup>2</sup> had ordered all Spaniards to take refuge in the fort. But this did not seem to be a pirate ship. How could it be when the captain had invited the authorities on board the vessel to see for themselves they were on a peaceful mission? It was, perhaps, the island's very insulation in a world where communications took months to travel the distance from Europe to America that kept them unaware of the fact that England, the Netherlands, or better said, Holland, and France, had formed a coalition in 1596 against Spain, which meant the mere presence of a vessel belonging to one of these countries should have been viewed as an enemy attack. But the people of Castro were unaware of it. The *Corregidor* appointed Pedro de Villagoya to board the ship and negotiate with the Dutch, the first in a chain of errors and ingenuities.

The envoy succumbed to the personal charm and argumentations of Baltasar de Cordes, who told him he was a Catholic. In today's day and age, this would have been unimportant, but in 1600, only a few years after the bloodbath between Catholics and Huguenots, it was equivalent to a dogma of faith. The voyage of *Fidelidad* - declared the captain - had only trading in mind, and suffice it to imagine Villagoya's credulousness on ascertaining the amount of penuries the crew had undergone till their arrival in Chiloé. Besides, Baltasar de Cordes had, to all appearances, been so sincere - he had even revealed to the emissary that the Indians had proposed a plan to do away with the Spaniards! According to Errázuriz, a notable Chilean historian in the late nineteenth century, in his *Historia de Chiloé* (History of Chiloé), Cordes, when referring to the natives, "insisted on the need to be always on guard and to mistrust those traitors."

The envoy returned to Castro in an almost ecstatic mood. A visit to the ship was enough to prove the intentions of the Dutch were absolutely honest and that it was better to talk things over than to start hostilities. Furthermore, the vessel was equipped with powerful weaponry capable of dissuading any attack. The authorities were not long in conceding he was right. He returned to the vessel with gifts for the captain, soon followed by banquets, confidences and - why not? - a joint plan between Spaniards and Dutch to eliminate the traitorous Indians. It would be tiresome to list the details of the plan, but it is enough to point out that the people of Castro, in an unequivocal show of sincerity and consideration, received gunpowder and a thousand harquebus bullets from the pirates, so they could defend the city from an imminent attack by the aborigines.

The consequences, obviously, were entirely different. Cordes disembarked a large part of his crew alleging they would be required in the event of an attack, and convinced the authorities to send their six best captains aboard *Fidelidad* to draw up a joint defense strategy. As a result Pedro de Villagoya, who was on board the vessel, and the six officers immediately had their throats cut. The massacre that followed was unprecedented on the island. The pirate hosts, supported by the Indians, entered the city, convinced the population - still unaware of what was going on - to take refuge in the church, which was as good as catching them in a rat-trap. Cordes had all the men - about thirty of them - murdered; the women were allowed to live, not out of mercy but to abuse them sexually or make them slaves to the Indians. Not even the local priest escaped the hordes, for Pedro de Contreras Borra was stoned and beaten to death by the very same Indians he had baptized and taught catechism to. As if this were not enough, they then cut his head off.

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<sup>2</sup> Spanish magistrate

But Baltasar de Cordes' plot, as so often happens in history, was doomed to end differently. Not far from the city was a Spanish captain, Luis Pérez de Vargas, with twenty-five men, who one night decided to take Castro by a surprise attack. And it was then a heroine emerged who was able to turn the tide of events and transform defeat into victory. *Doña Inés Bazán*, the widow of captain Juanes de Oyarzún was to turn the Castro occupation into a victory of no small consideration. The pirates, unlike the soldiers, lacked military structure, rigid restraint and, in particular, that essential discipline required to keep control once victory had been achieved. *Doña Inés*, took advantage of the drunken state of the invaders - only to be expected because of their lack of military discipline - and had the brilliant idea of wetting the fuses on the cannons and putting a nail in the hole where the lighted fuses are inserted, which rendered the cannons completely useless. Captain Pérez de Vargas was informed of this, by a rudimentary communication system: a missive sent to him by the heroine, a not unusual practice, for letters going through enemy lines, or palace walls, were common currency of the time. The letter enabled him to plan the ultimate capture of Castro with other Spanish forces in the area.

But neither *doña Inés*, nor Pedro de Torres, the soldier who supported her in her initiative, were able to flee the city. They were betrayed. Cordes had the soldier hanged in the presence of the indomitable Spaniard, so she could see with her own eyes what it was like to die on the gallows. *Doña Inés* neither begged for mercy nor resorted to her womanhood as a reason for clemency; she never uttered a word. We can imagine her valiantly climbing onto the improvised scaffold, willing to face death, satisfied at knowing that it was her intervention that had rendered the enemy cannon useless, and that Spanish troops would soon be entering Castro. Perhaps it was that unexpected courage, that admirable strength of mind, that made Cordes spare her life at the last minute, with the noose already round her neck. But the alternative was only slightly less cruel, for he had her ferociously flogged.

The story ended as was to be expected, with the victory of the good guys and the bad guys soundly routed, in the best Hollywood style. Several Dutchmen died in battle, while Baltasar de Cordes, after countless vicissitudes and acrobatics, managed to make it to *Fidelidad*, weigh anchors, raise the sails and set sail. He didn't get far, though, before the vessel went aground on one of the reefs round the island only to be saved a short time later by one of the regular deep tides, with their seven-meter variations. Punishments inflicted by the Spaniards were exemplary: over thirty traitorous Indian-chiefs were hanged. Fortune, however, had a special end in store for Baltasar de Cordes, who after his frustrated invasion of Chiloé sailed deep into the heart of the Pacific to the island of Tidor, in the Moluccas. But no spices awaited him there, or coveted peppercorns, or even unprepared cities to devastate; what actually awaited him were the Portuguese, who captured him, threw him into a jail in Malacca and ultimately knifed him along with several members of his crew.

The Spaniards were never able to forget this episode. Thus, when the second Dutch raid came in 1643, forty-three years later, they were prepared. When Dutch admiral Henrik Brouwer arrived in Castro, he found the people of Castro had anticipated what the Russians would do to Napoleon on his march towards Moscow: the city was razed to the ground, with no stores or provisions, and nothing to be pillaged. In disappointment, Brouwer left the island and headed for Valdivia where he fared much better, for he was able to take over the city.

Another century went by before Chiloé was exposed to any other notable foreign presence. There was an unexpected enemy visit, which though harmless, sought to examine the customs on the island, how the people in Chiloé lived, how the authorities acted and how the Jesuits, who had settled there in 1608, were handled.

It is likely the most valid testimonies are those provided by English travelers who, despite their anticlericalism, had an acute and imaginative vision of these southern lands. The first British citizen to write about Chiloé was John Byron, Lord Byron's grandfather. He was not in fact a traveler - as was Charles Darwin - but a political prisoner.

In 1739, war broke out between Spain and England and Lord Anson sailed from Portsmouth with three vessels, with the somewhat optimistic aim of hunting down Spanish ships in the Pacific, a good example of wishful thinking. Though English sailors were skilled and hardened seamen, they were unaware of the extent to which they would at some point be at the mercy of God, depending no longer on their sextant and nautical expertise: that point was Cape Horn, with waves harking back to the times of Creation. Here two oceans - Atlantic and Pacific - met head on, and this encounter could be overwhelming if the currents, surge and winds contributed to the scene, often coming close to that of original chaos. When Lord Anson's small party ultimately arrived in these waters, the tempests soon decimated them. Yet there was one frigate, the *Wager*, that survived; this was the vessel midshipman John Byron had enlisted on. This mariner over the years achieved great progress in his naval career, for he became an Admiral in the British navy and was named Governor of Terranova, in Canada. But he is best remembered for other reasons - as the grandfather of romantic poet Lord Byron, for having survived a shipwreck, for having lived the life of the Indians in his time, for having been a prisoner in Chiloé, leaving behind a wonderful wealth of watercolors of the island and its customs in the eighteenth century.

On the Guayaneca islands south of Chiloé the frigate *Wager* foundered on a rock, that cut open her hull, and she was barely able to stagger to a nearby island. And as so often happens in shipwreck accounts, this was only the beginning: from mutinies to the building of another vessel, *Speedwell*, with the remnants of the frigate, which carried off one contingent. To make this story short, John Byron remained on the islands and confronted a variety of misadventures - there are myriad accounts of his doings. His book, *The Loss of the Wager, The narrative of the Honorable John Byron*, written in 1768, reveals that, in order to survive solitude, climate, hunger and the desolation of these islands, he lived with Chono Indians. And he did, to the point of practically becoming one of them, smearing grease on his body and wearing sealskins to keep warm. Eventually, after living in this primitive state, he approached the coasts of Chiloé, where the Spanish authorities, along with Captain Cheap and Mr. Campbell, captured him.

They were taken to Castro as prisoners, where they arrived dirty, hungry and lice-ridden. Before they had been locked up on some remote hill where a Jesuit father visited them. Anti-popish feelings and antipathy towards the Catholic clergy are clear in Byron's *The Loss of the Wager, The narrative of the Honorable John Byron*.

*About the third day, a Jesuit from Castro carne to see us; not from a motive of compassion, but from a report spread by our Indian cacique, that we had some things of great value about us. Having by chance seen Captain Cheap pull out a gold repeating watch, the first thing the good father did was to lug out of his pocket a*

*bottle of brandy, and give us a dram, in order to open our hearts. He then came roundly to the point, asking us if we had saved no watches or rings. Captain Cheap declared he had nothing, never suspecting that the Indian had seen his watch, having, as he thought, always taken great care to conceal it from him; but knowing that Campbell had a silver watch, which had been the property of our surgeon, he desired him to make it a present to the Jesuit, telling him, at the same time, that as these people had great power and authority, it might be of service to us hereafter. This Campbell very unwillingly did, and received from the father, not long after, a pitiful present, not a quarter part of the value of the rim of the watch. We understood afterwards, that this had come to the governor's ears, who was highly offended at it, as thinking that if any thing of that sort had been to be had, it was his due; and did not spare the Jesuits in the least upon the occasion.*

Byron and his companions were adequately fed and well treated, so much so that they were invited to spend three weeks on the rural property of a Chiloé society lady. But it was inevitable a foreigner should feel revulsion at the corruption in the colonial administration, at the veniality of officials, whether laymen or religious. And, as a protestant and iconoclast, he loathed the religious effigies, as well as the pagan custom of kissing them. Once, as a guest at the home of one of the ladies in Chiloé, his hosts took out sacred stamps and kissed them with devotion, a sacrilege he, as a “heretic” refused to commit. Almost simultaneously there was a strong earth tremor and the ladies precipitately left the house to avoid the roof coming down on their heads. Naturally, John Byron was blamed for provoking divine wrath.

In contrast to this Englishman educated in Protestant traditions and strong in his disparagement of Rome, people in Castro - and the rest of the island inhabitants - feel a profound respect for the Jesuits, who came on the scene in the seventeenth century. Intellectuals in Castro and Ancud display a historical analysis of the Company of Jesus and the profound cultural impression they made on this land. They feel - as do the immense majority - that the disciples of San Ignacio de Loyola brought culture to those wild, wretched outposts, and one of their greatest contributions was making these natives literate, which several centuries later meant that illiteracy was practically non-existent. The first to arrive were Germans. Which is why the steeped larch-tiled churches in Chiloé, look as though they had come straight from Bavaria.

The Jesuit administrative organization, involving community work, windmills and wooden tools was translated into a sound financial and spiritual framework, despite the opinion of John Byron.

And this is acknowledged by even the staunchest of local left-wing supporters.

The first day of the year, Castro seems to have become a ghost town with everything closed except for the gas stations. Not even hotels provide food for their guests. People in Castro have the deeply rooted habit of spending the day - or the weekend - out in the country; that is, in a wooden cabin in the hills or nearby a lake, belonging to some relation, or, if the weather is sunny - as it was that first day of January - they organize bucolic picnics out in the meadows. I resolved I would get to know a certain spot in the archipelago I had discovered in a book with snapshots of Chiloé on show at the *El Tren* bookstore. The place was known as Detif, a minute

village on the seashore with its wooden church, at the southern tip of Lemuy Island. The road by car was a long narrow gravel tongue along the mountain ridges, which was like driving along the back of a dragon. Tourist guides warned people the slopes were extremely steep, which meant that after a sharp downward tract, there could be a point of no return for some vehicles, incapable of climbing such steep slopes.

The desolation of that first day of the year in Castro was no less obvious on the road to Chonchi, where you take the ferry to Lemuy. This is the area where numerous cabins have been built - some of them intent on imitating palafittes, for they are set on stilts in the sea - used for tourists, who come to Chiloé in decreasing numbers. Less and less people are interested in spending summer vacations on the island, save for those in love with its culture, and foreigners, in the main Europeans, who are only passing through, coming from Magellan or from Torres del Paine National Park. The Castro fjord, south of the city, achieves maximum splendor when you reach Nercón. The tiny *plaza* and its exquisite wooden church, with beams holding up the walls, as though it were about to collapse, is perhaps the best ever example of beauty, but there are only a few who come to appreciate this tiny ecclesiastical jewel.

Chiloé, -which in Huilliche tongue means, land of seagulls - is like Cinderella, whose gown becomes rags on the stroke of midnight, while her jeweled chariot turns into a gigantic pumpkin. Just as the girl in the fable lives just a single short night, the island lives a single short month, February. In those few days there are folklore festivals - which the Chileans love - events, processions, celebrations, culinary festivals where both tourists and locals take part. It is this time of the year that literally saves - to the full extent of the word - hotels, cabin proprietors and restaurateurs. But come March - just like the twelve strokes of midnight in the fable - the island is once again deserted, like on that particularly phantasmagoric first day of January.

To cross over to Lemuy, one has to take a ferry close to Chonchi. Often, while awaiting departure, some villager asks to be taken along. In Chiloé, a foreigner is inevitably addressed as *caballero*. This is how Jorge, a young Chiloé native, who had to get to the island of Chelín that first day of the year, addressed me. He worked at a gas station in Castro and, as is usual among Chiloé natives when traveling, had splashed on a good deal of perfume. His family lived in a small island of the archipelago, away from urban centers, and four hours by boat from Castro. If there is something I would not describe as simple it is conversing with people from peasant culture, who are unaware of urban codes, dialectics or absolutely conventional topics. They are taciturn and suspicious. Their sole topics of conversation are usually the weather, or some geographic reference to the place they are passing through. Yet, as we climbed the steep slopes leading to Ichuac and its stunning larch-tiled church, he took out a mobile phone, and in no time was talking to his father in Chelín. Imagine life on this tiny island, hardly more than a promontory with trees in the middle of the sea, without land transport, without a hospital. Messages were sent by radio and took hours to reach the recipient - if they ever got there. The mobile phone cut through the isolation of these peasants and fishermen and placed them drastically in the twentieth century. Remote places ceased to exist. Islands as far off as those known as the Deserters became part of the archipelago. And Chelín, perhaps one of the most beautiful, had suddenly met the world; which does not necessarily mean customs had changed. The delicious church with its six-column portico and its dauntless tower still stood there. The cemetery, its tombs like miniature houses with roofs and windows, which continue to harbor the dead's belongings to keep them company. All that

managed to break in on that centenary tranquility was the mobile phone. At the ring of a phone Jorge's father would prepare his launch and outboard motor and cross the strait to wait for him in Puchilco, something simply unimaginable a few years back.

Still, some customs are maintained, as though time had never elapsed. And Jorge, despite his contact with urban progress working at the gas station, probably responded to a sentimental culture described by Pedro Rubén Azócar, an anthropologist and intellectual from Chiloé, in his book *Chiloé: las islas y su mundo* (Chiloé: the islands and their world), written almost fifty years ago.

*A particular kind of independence prevails among youngsters in connection with relationships between men and women, who are free to come and go together through fields, beaches and forests without their freedom becoming licentiousness. One could, in fact, say just the opposite happens, despite a strong tension in the sexual sphere. For a woman this independence disappears when she accepts a suitor, and even more so when she gets married. And this topic of having a friendship also involves something striking: young men find in the young girls around them who are not taboo - blood relatives, their friends' sisters, daughters of people helping out in the home, among those with a higher income - the alternative of a sexual adventure without concerns in the ethical order of things, but once they fall in love they become rigid puritans. No sighs or melancholic gestures, but there is greater voluntary participation in family work, more of a distance from long-time friends, some concession towards dressing up, less time at dances where, to all appearances, social groups mix without distinction, and longer conversations with the adults in the family. Parents will say: "the boy is becoming a man".*

*Among women the situation takes on other expressions. In contrast to their upright character and behavior - by upbringing and by nature - they are allowed to openly manifest their preference for the one they have chosen. They wordlessly, albeit rebelliously, accept the not always gentle parental discipline, and, loving with their whole being, once they have made up their minds there is little likelihood of their being thwarted from their intent by prohibitions, risks or respect. And marriage or concubinage will, not by social or religious imposition but rather by the deepest and most complex determination, be a life-time commitment, without renouncing or vacillating, and without taking their eyes off their man's to "look" at another, even though their man returns to his youthful pursuits, and almost without realizing it, carries on with his roving, constantly whetting his curiosity and living just like his circle of friends.*

Jorge got out at an uninteresting little village by the name of Puqueldón, for Detif - my destination - lay in the opposite direction. Deforestation, in the positive sense of the word, had favored the island of Lemuy: there were roads and meadows, something Charles Darwin did not encounter on his visit in 1834: at that time there were impenetrable forests that stretched all the way down to the seashore.

On the way to Detif, as happens in so many other places in Chiloé, it is usual to see sown plots of land, with neatly lined up green plants which upon investigation prove to be potatoes. Actually, how important could a field full of tubers be, apart from a traveler's curiosity to know what kind of vegetable it is? What foreigners are rarely aware of is that potatoes are a substantial part of Chiloé culture and patrimony

and not simply an annual agricultural cycle but rather something much more emblematic; and, if imagination, tradition and global marketing strategies were brought together, potatoes could become an unsuspected source of income for the islanders. Potatoes - like timber - are part of the very history of Chiloé, which means we can talk of potato culture in its broadest sense.

Few people are aware that numerous varieties of potatoes went from Chiloé to Europe, during the sixteenth century, taken there by the Spaniards. Sir Walter Raleigh introduced potatoes in Elizabethan England, but Chiloé potatoes are much more sophisticated and heterogeneous than those found in North America.

This incredible unexploited wealth has had its setbacks over the last few decades, either because potato varieties tend to disappear or because it is gradually being left out of the island's everyday fare. It is unavoidable one should wonder how a God-given gift like this could be wasted. It is interesting to reproduce part of a paper by Roberto Santana, published in a magazine by the Los Lagos University in Osorno.

*Regarding the spread of Chiloé potatoes in Europe and other parts of the world, there are many areas of knowledge still in darkness, but there is agreement on one important point: it is known that numerous primitive Chiloé varieties formed the basis for famous breeding grounds in the nineteenth century, mainly in Europe. Among them, doubtless one of the most valuable plants in the whole world is the **Rough Purple Chili**, introduced in 1848 in North America and later cultivated in Panama, leading to the creation of the **Early Rose** variety, which in time was introduced in Europe. All the precocious varieties not introduced until the nineteenth century were to have their origin in this. Likewise, in 1830 Germany introduced another famous variety known as **Daber**.*

Potatoes have formed part of Chiloé cooking since time immemorial. There are a number of dishes cooked with this tuber: *milcao*, *baeme*, *thropon*, *chapalele*, *chuño*, *dempu*, *erengo*, *huilqueme*, and all combinations it would be tedious to describe in detail. Suffice it to say they are a part of the islanders' basic fare. Agricultural economy in Chiloé could change substantially if potatoes were given added value. So far, *milcao*, bread made on the basis of a mixture of potato grated and then cooked, butter and crisp pork rind, satisfies the local population, but is not easily adaptable to foreigners' palates. Potato is used too in making *curanto*, the typical Chiloé dish, *par excellence*, which also has *milcao*; this dish could be no more than a gastronomic anecdote in the itinerary of a tourist, and easily forgettable. For Chiloé potatoes to excel in international cuisine would have required a colossal effort as regards imagination and production, involving not only agricultural producers but also government authorities, marketing experts, advertisers, chefs and, above all, people with drive and imagination.

Just as Chile has imposed Hass avocados all over the world, Chiloé should impose its potatoes. Let's just imagine for a moment sitting in a restaurant in Paris perusing the menu provided by the maitre. How feasible and delicious it would be to have meat prepared with the most superb salads and Burgundy wines, accompanied by *Pommes de terre de Chiloé*. There is no limit to what the palate - and snobbery - can achieve.

I pondered all this while I contemplated a modest potato plantation, at a surprisingly sloped angle, on the way to Detif. This summer noon, the very power of the landscape suddenly became primitive, entirely different from what well might have been a postcard with Swiss mountains or Norwegian fjords. Clear daylight provided a view of the volcanoes on the Chilean continent, Hornopiren, Michimahuida, coming to a head in the amazing Corcovado. The road wound along on the dragon's back, providing an even more primeval perception: the absolute solitude, the absurdly steep slope, the sea far below, on both sides of the path, the car painstakingly climbing the hills thanks to its front-wheel traction. And then, eventually, Detif, indigenous dialect for *bay of noises*, which is remarkable for the silence here is all-pervading. The little larch-wood church is only open on Sundays. The Jesuits had built all their churches with steep steeples, so sailors would recognize the islands, as sort of spiritual and nautical lighthouses, which nowadays guide fishermen in murky Chiloé weather.

The road down to Detif must be the steepest in the entire region and not even cars with double traction dare to try the descent. It has to be done on foot. And, in traversing that vast horseshoe-shaped beach, one knows deep down it is one of the remotest places in Chiloé, a *non plus ultra* where foreigners rarely set foot.

If during the daytime that first of January Castro was like a ghost town, when evening fell this illusion became even more acute, for everything remained closed. All restaurants were closed and one couldn't find a place to have a sandwich.. And when talking of evening falling, it is worth noting that, unlike the tropics where the sun falls at surprising speed, in southern lands the process is slow and long-drawn out, as though night would never come. I was eventually able to unearth a place with wide open doors, where the few foreigners in the town were gathering, like shipwrecked sailors who discover an island. It was close to the harbor, not exactly the most attractive of locations. But the *Unicornio Azul* hotel - for this was its name - was something more than an island. Though surrounded by rundown, unattractive constructions, it had *atmosphere*. The old recycled zinc edifice built into a slope - and unable to escape the deafening caws of the ibis - has been photographed by *National Geographic Magazine* and still attracts worldly characters in search of a particular type of hotel catering.

That evening, the hotel dining room was crowded with foreigners and there wasn't a single table available. To make matters worse, an enormous yacht had anchored in the Castro fjord and a good many of the passengers now filled the small salon. It was there I saw her come in, perplexed and disoriented by the amount of diners. I had seen her that afternoon on the ferry, about to set off on the trip back from the island of Lemuy to Chonchi. It was the last ferry that day, being the first of January. She arrived breathlessly, rushing up the ramp as though she feared being left on this island where there wasn't even a hotel to spend the night. Though one would expect to come across Europeans - for the most part globetrotters - in this kind of far-flung spots, it is unusual to encounter an unaccompanied middle-aged woman, with nothing but smart black boots to survive the gravel roads of Lemuy. As the ferry made its way across the narrow channel this strange passenger gazed almost gloatingly at the landscape.

She settled down at the bar, we started chatting and asked for *pisco sours*. While we waited for a table I learnt she was born in Switzerland, in the Italian canton and that she lived in Locarno. Leona - for this was her name - was a teacher of pedagogy and psychology, she spoke in English and had the inevitable background in tourism: she had covered the south of Chile and had ventured out onto the *Carretera Austral* (Southern Road), a fearsome gravel pathway that led off to the remotest



corners of the land. It was, of course, inevitable to wonder what a woman like her was doing alone here in Castro on New Year's Day.

"My former husband lives in Paraguay," she told me. "My son is spending his holidays with his father and I'll be meeting up with him in a few days in Santiago.

The question, perhaps, was not what *she* was doing there but rather what attraction could the *Unicornio Azul* have for all the people in the restaurant, tucked away on an anonymous island, with a climate which was to say the least - as I was soon to discover - detestable, primitive and without any of the comforts of the northern hemisphere. The response is no doubt mysterious; but the truth is that Chiloé, like the huge expanses of southern Chile, stretching beyond the Magellan Strait, exercises an almost hypnotic power over the traveler, due precisely to the solitude and drama of its landscapes. Europeans, Americans or Canadians are most likely in search of what they are unable to find in their own land: a culture at times primeval, an absolute lack of anything industrial and a curious sort of estrangement the soul achieves in these territories. But, to return to Leona, with whom I conversed - almost to the point of exhaustion - along conventional, even worldly lines for the two hours we waited at the bar counter for a vacant table. When we eventually took our seats we were provided with a broad bill of fare à la carte, but soon discovered there were few dishes left: she made do with a predictable sea salmon, while I settled for a *shrimp pil pil* which, when placed before me, I found to be diminutive - so much so that Leona offered to share her salmon with me.

The food and the endless *pisco sours* contributed to the conversation veering from more conventional lines. The first thing she told me was that her former husband was not Paraguayan but Swiss, and had worked his whole life on Third World country development projects - which meant Leona had had to live in the most unexpected and exotic places. Katmandu was the first destination for this young Swiss couple, bursting with ideals and anticipation. For four years Leona absorbed the Nepalese culture, toured monasteries and caught glimpses of the snowy peaks in the Himalayans. Picture this woman, young and probably beautiful, taking in all this world could provide her, from strolls through iridescently green valleys set against the most imposing mountains in the world, to the compulsive curiosity towards learning the secrets concealed in this land. Four years living in another dimension, a newly wed bride, with boundless capacity for amazement. This was followed by four years in Nigeria, which meant a drastic adjustment from one culture to another, from an intensely cold climate to broiling heat. But Leona must have been searching tirelessly for new cultural sources. Thus, over the following twenty years, while her husband worked with the precision of a Swiss timepiece on the development of emerging economies, the couple skipped from country to country, from culture to culture. They lived in Senegal, Indonesia, Vietnam, among other countries.

This existential background to some extent explained the fact of her touring the south of Chile entirely on her own. But the mere mention of their lengthy stay in Vietnam caught my imagination, for she had been there during the time this country opted to close in on itself. What on earth could a Swiss lady do with herself in this xenophobic oriental land, with a language impossible to understand, beyond the protection of her husband's job, which provided them with almost diplomatic status.

"Hanoi is a dangerous city, very dangerous," she stressed. "We were there for four years, which is no mean achievement. Surprisingly, everything, absolutely *everything*, is under lock and key. They have this almost pathological 'thing' for locks and padlocks. One day I decided I'd had enough. I was fed up of this

schizophrenic life in impossible countries. Vietnam was simply the straw that broke the camel's back.

It was this decision, according to Leona, that prompted the divorce. It was, however, surprising that a woman like her should bring her marriage to an end simply because of having to live in exotic places. This might happen to a bourgeois woman, without any intellectual aspirations, but for someone like her, a psychologist and pedagogue, it did not sound plausible. Otherwise, I would never have met her jumping onto a ferry leaving from Lemuy. Nor would she have walked along the steep, stony paths of the island, or managed to make it to Aldachildo, or regretted being unable to tour the church because it was closed, or hitched a ride to get back to the landing jetty. It would, perhaps, have been more likely to find her on a Greek island, or in Luxor. Something had happened to that marriage, and it had little to do with the exhaustion exotic countries might have caused. I don't know what led me to ask her whether her husband had remarried.

Leona looked downward, a pensive look on her face. But she traveled, seasoned woman of the world lost her composure and revealed her vulnerability for only an instant. Her broad smile was back in a flash, showing her impeccable style

"He married a Vietnamese woman, from Hanoi."

The response, wrapped in a mundane gesture, was tantamount to a confession. The most painful part of it, perhaps, was that an oriental woman, lacking her husband's European culture, a woman who in time would not even be physically attractive, had replaced her.

She was particularly insistent about my not paying for her meal. She only let me pay for the *piscos sours* and the taxi that took us back to our respective hotels. Attempting to climb the unbelievably steep *calle* Blanco on foot would have been foolhardy at that time of night and after so many cocktails.

The following morning Leona had left for Santiago. Her hotel was just across the way from mine, and she left a newspaper in English, several days old, on the windshield of my car. She had written on it: "It's old, but it has good information". She also left me her e-mail address, though I never got any answer to the messages I sent her.

Though exhibited as a rare curiosity, she languishes among bronze plaques with the inscription "Ferrocarriles del Estado, 5057 MSB". I refer to the old narrow-gauge steam engine that linked Castro to Ancud. The locomotive is tiny, almost a toy, like so many other things in Chiloé: people, trains, horses and buildings. Everything is small. For forty-eight years this sturdy engine hauled passengers and cargo across the grasslands of Chiloé, across wooden bridges, through forests, climbing up and down that unforeseeable geography. She languishes now opposite the *Unicornio Azul*, on the embankment, where the old railway station used to be. Nobody remembers the train nowadays, and it is hardly more than a vague reference in the minds of the people. It is remembered, however, by Pablo Neruda, in the fragment of a letter addressed to Rubén Azócar, the legendary Chilean writer married to a woman from Chonchi whose sister, Albertina, Neruda was deeply in love with, and devoted memorable poems to. The letter was written from Ancud on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1925 and is reproduced in bronze at the foot of the old steam engine.

*"For that is why this railway would never achieve power."*

*This was no black, shining colossus forging bravely ahead towards the folly of bridges or eternity.*

*She charged not fatally nor tore down children or suicidal nighttime marauders.*

*This was a slothful, rainy day train, a thin damp fungus crawling up the mountain. The large slug which, camouflaged as a cohíhue, stopped to smell the myrtles along the way.*

*Weak, ill-fated ironsides. Rusted, lichens thriving with every word. And though the leeches of La Piruquina tried to suck away some of the sadness oozing from its irons, it was all in vain; for the steam was like the blood of the huilliche train workers, from the boundary of the skies..."*

Towards the end of the nineteenth century it was hard to get a glimpse of the skies of Chiloé, concealed by the dense forest, intent on climbing the slopes of the Pirulil cordillera. The skies could be seen from the city, from the beach or from the sea - which shows how hard it was to go from one place to another. Going from Ancud to Castro involved a journey that took several days and could only be done on horseback - like Darwin did -, with the mounts plodding along paths intersected by wooden beams which prevented them from sinking into the damp earth. Few were the people who dared to cover such long distances. Nor was traveling by boat easy, going from island to island in the archipelago, defying currents and disproportionate tides. It was precisely then, in the early twentieth century, that Chile had become a paradigm for *progress*; in a country that had copied the European economic model, thousands of kilometers of railways were laid, from north to south, and even the Trans Andean railway was built, between Santiago and Mendoza, a prodigy of engineering, a sort of *Meccano* game winding along the snowy peaks. And yet Chiloé had no railway.

The island had been left to the mercies of its own geography, which had not been generous to travelers. But one day the train came. It was in 1912 that the inhabitants of Chiloé put an end to their centuries-old isolation. How fast they could go from Castro to Santiago! Eight hours by train to Ancud, seven hours by sea to Puerto Montt and then again the train, with splendid cabins and a dining car; a train that could get to the capital in less than two days. Before it would have required weeks of sailing. But the narrow-gauge railway in Chiloé was far from being luxurious, which in no way affected its inhabitants. It had only two coaches, two for passengers and one for storage. People traveling first class had only four upholstered seats, while people traveling third class had to sit facing each other along the entire length of the coach, on hard benches made of rustic wood, where there was only a minimum amount of space left for the inspector who sold the tickets to get by. Yet travelers felt it was more than enough. For during their trip the forty passengers traveling on what would now be called economy class got to know each other, partook of sandwiches and drank wine. Moreover, at Puntra, halfway between the two cities, everybody got out for lunch. There, amid the leafy forest of elms and hazel trees, was a German cottage where a Teutonic hostess provided passengers with a wide variety of culinary delicacies.

Camaraderie - or necessity, depending on how one may look at it - worked to perfection on rainy days or when frost was particularly intense. Vasallo Rojas and Matus Gutiérrez, in *Ferrocarriles de Chile, Historia y Organización*, [Chilean Railways, History and Organization] reproduce a testimony by César Asencio, a frequent passenger as from 1949.

*The sufferings of the engine driver, officials and passengers came to a head in rainy or freezing weather. The rails got slippery and the train simply could not climb the slopes on the way. So we all got out to push the train. The passengers stood behind the coaches and pushed for all they were worth, laughing and calling to each other. A railway employee stood at the side of the jutting cowcatcher and sprinkled the line with sand as the train slowly made its way forward. Once this difficulty had been overcome, the train picked up speed, as though proud of itself, letting off smoke and sparks in all directions.”*

When the train steamed into Castro these sparks sometimes set fire to the wooden houses close to the line, and the neighbors would flock to help put these fires out.

One Sunday towards the end of May 1960, at three o'clock in the afternoon, the earth shook with an intensity, which had not been felt since the sixteenth century. It was primeval fury, as though the earth were going from one geological era to another, and even the sea contributed with enormous waves to this Apocalypse. Chiloé suffered the impact of the earthquake and of the persistent recurrences that so terrified the inhabitants. The railway lines so carefully drawn by engineers were swallowed up by the earth and simply disappeared, as though they had never existed. Mountain slopes and entire forests collapsed into the bowels of the earth and the wooden bridges were shattered into a thousand pieces. A single afternoon was enough to destroy what had cost so much to build, and even worse, it brought to an end the only means of land transport available to the inhabitants of Chiloé.

Little is left of the ancient railway, except for some nostalgic stations and the antiquated steam engine, languishing at the landing stage in Castro.

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## THAT PRIMEVAL FORCE

One characteristic feature of Chiloé is an inveterate lack of information, or, as a somewhat minor variant, a sort of lack of precision. Any directions provided by a native of Chiloé, particularly as regards geography and services, will seldom tie in with actual fact. In *The voyage of the Beagle* I had read about Charles Darwin's journey to Cucao, a remote spot on the western coast of the island, where the waves breaking on the beach could well be compared to those of original chaos prior to Creation. The lobby at *Hostería de Castro* neatly displayed brochures promoting the place, and even offering to provide 4-wheel drive vehicles for transport. But as so often happens in these whereabouts, the tourist agency offering this option no longer stood opposite the *plaza* and a barber's shop had now taken its place. The only mobile phone available for information about this kind of sightseeing was disconnected – and everyone I asked about the gravel road to Cucao gave me the same answer: the road was in deplorable conditions, if not worse.

One December 31<sup>st</sup> I decided to make my own way there. Instead of going by car, I took a bus that left a few blocks from the main square; the trip, I was assured at the window where I bought the ticket, would take no more than an hour and a half. Some time before leaving the bus was already packed with people, country folk apparently fleeing the town, as though threatened by some strange plague, armed with the most incredible household supplies. I took a few moments to register that; of course, the people of Castro would want to see the new year in with their peasant kin. Strangely enough, though, what they placed on the luggage rack were bags of bran – pig-feed, cardboard boxes and black plastic trash bags where they carried their belongings. There were a handful of backpackers, apparently undaunted by the torment of a bus-ride in unfrequented areas and, most particularly, in Andean countries. The first stop was Chonchi, where a good many more passengers got on, and the transport soon began to resemble the cabin in the Marx Brothers' *A night in the Opera* which was so crowded its occupants were practically expelled out the cabin .

Eventually Lake Huillinco – which Darwin refers to as Vilinco – came into sight, surrounded by mountains and dense forestation, a black-water mirror, which, after becoming a narrow passageway at Lake Cucao, in due course flows into the Pacific ocean. The naturalist, for a want of any better kind of road at the time, sailed across the waters of the lake in a sort of piragua driven by tiny oarsmen, sharing the craft with a cow.

The wealth of mythology in Chiloé is arguably unique in South America. Several regions of the island relate to major or minor deities, as was the case in Greek mythology. Lake Cucao, in fact, harbors myths the Chiloé natives have fervently believed in at some time in their history. *La Huenchula* is one of those intimately linked to Lake Cucao, simply because she discovered in its waters a strange shape, half man, half wolf, the *Millalobo*, a major deity. Irresistibly attracted by this primitive being, she was drawn down with him into the ocean depths. Her mother, *la Huenchur*, refusing to

accept the loss of her daughter, left the safety of her wooden cabin by the lake to travel mountains and gorges, sailing the lake in a *bongo*<sup>1</sup> and wailing over and over “Cucao Cucao Cucao Cule”. It was this despairing cry that gave these deep murky waters their name.

My trip, naturally, took over three hours, and more than once we were all made to get out and push the vehicle so it could make it to the top of a steep slope. It also stopped to pick up four youths who were clambering down the mountainside carrying a live sheep, its legs tied to a stick, which in no way hindered its being neatly placed on the luggage rack.

Cucao is little more than a beach with an array of sand dunes framed by the mountains. The sound of the waves can be heard breaking on the beach, for it is less than a kilometer away. Darwin claimed that, in stormy weather, the roar of the waves, after piercing forests and mountains, eventually reached all the way to Castro.

But what is truly overwhelming in this remotest of outposts is the sea: the beach is no more than five hundred meters from the bus stop, and the breakers are just like those Darwin marveled at when, mounted on horseback, he came upon this sandy beach stretching twelve kilometers to Punta Huentemó, where it plunges into the raging sea. Cucao gives the impression of being God’s ultimate creation, as though He had deliberately left it till the end, with the wind fiercely buffeting and whipping up equally ferocious waves. A desolate landscape pervaded with that primeval force projected by the Pirulil cordillera. And the rain that rarely ceases.

Towards the south, the landscape is no less desolate. On the furthest boundaries of the beach, where the mountains plunge into the sea at the fiercely battered peninsula of Punta Pirulil, is the haunt of the Cucao Spirits, wailing, howling and moaning nightly in the twilight. They cry out for the Temilcahue, a boatman, who is to take them from this macabre place and carry them off beyond the horizon, where peace and happiness abide. None can communicate with them, and whoever might dare to will join these Spirits within the year.

The solitude and the fact that no vessel would be able to anchor there – for the western coast of the island is all ominous cliffs, terrifying waves and threatening breakers – transformed Cucao, in the mid 1930’s, into a rare gem that attracted artists and intellectuals alike during the summer months. How on earth did they make it to this remote wilderness in those days when not even a road existed? The boldest of them took off from Castro in shaky airplanes, flew over Lake Huillinco, the Cucao, climbed over the unexpected heights of the Pirulil cordillera and landed on the broad expanse of beach. The most conservative crossed over Lake Huillinco in a rowboat, or a motorboat, a crossing that took between three and five hours, weather permitting: when the wind blows in from the sea, it whips up waves that make the lake impassable. These pioneers of anthropological tourism rented modest houses or lived in a room at Julio Maldini’s boarding house. What a delight it must have been for those explorers to ride along the beach to Punta Huentemó, and chat with the Huilliches, or get together to carry out surprising dialectic exercises. They were the happy few who had discovered a sort of long-lost paradise.

One day a small plane flew over Capilla de Cucao, as it was known at the time, but was unable to land because of the sheep on the makeshift runway. But the pilot’s wife sitting in the cockpit was never again able to forget that first impression, returning summer after summer for several years, and was one day to write the best ethnological paper on Cucao. In fact, Lotte Weisner, in her *Cucao, tierra de soledades* [*Cucao, Land*

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<sup>1</sup> Wooden boat

*of Solitudes]*, traces a painstaking and impeccable study of this township, cut off from the world and lost in the rigors of the Pacific Ocean, between 1964 and 1969. That first glimpse from the air was enough to spark the idea of delving down into their cultural roots. Lotte Weisner provides an accurate description of this in her book:

*Though fleeting, my first glimpse of Cucao was enough to capture the full beauty of this place, its geographical isolation, and hence, its profound research interest for anthropology, archaeology and human geography. And I must confess that the wildness of the region awakened a singular attraction in me.*

*...I hasten to mention here the enormous challenge a task of this magnitude meant to me, as I sought to embark upon a host of such diverse topics. The **enormous distance** between the dwellings and the township likewise contributed to the difficulties, for I was constrained to cover long distances either on foot or on horseback to interview the locals. Had it been presumptuous of me to seek to carry out these surveys without any help? Undoubtedly, sharing these tasks with a team of qualified people would have made gathering and matching the data much easier.*

But this is sheer diffidence on the part of Lotte Weisner. Only she had the drive, the judgment, the enthusiasm and the methodology to carry forward the research, and was most likely right in not delegating these tasks, in giving them her own personal touch, and above all, letting herself be drawn along by her unerring wisdom. In her book she mentions Exequiel Álvarez, a descendant of the Huilliches she met during her initial research while he was still a child, and whom she interviewed only a few years ago, on one of her last journeys; she portrays him as one of the greatest – if not the greatest – entrepreneurs in Cucao. I learnt he lived beyond the bridge that spanned the river, in the area known as Chanquín, and made my way there one rarely warm, sun-drenched day.

Álvarez owns a sixty-hectare property that lies between the graveled road and the sea: it could hardly be less unassuming, like everything else in Chiloé. A tiny house, a shed-like outhouse, some livestock grazing quietly and a man to all appearances perpetually on the move, a sort of rural workaholic. So involved was he in his work that when I knocked on the door and introduced myself he asked whether I might return that afternoon at two thirty, for his wife was out and he was, therefore, shorthanded. I lunched at *Los Arrayanes* – a small restaurant nearby, which belongs to Álvarez, but had been rented out – and chose one of those splendid sea salmon the island so generously provides. At a table close by a young American couple were waiting for the bus to Castro after spending two days in a cabin on the banks of Lake Cucao; it came as no surprise when they told me they were from Iowa - their accent was clearly Midwestern.

“We walked as far as *Punta Huentemó*,” she told me, as though the twelve-kilometer hike were only a ten-minute stroll.

I was struck by the way she cut her salmon, digging her fork into it, grasping it in her fist, like someone sinking a knife into an opponent’s entrails. Later they told me how stunned they were by it, this tiny village, perhaps the perfect example of all that is primitive. It was there they had put up their tent that night. Cucao, and its surrounding areas, Chanquín, Paligue, Huentemó and Huelde have an irresistible fascination among young foreigners, perhaps because they know that, anthropologically speaking, there is no other place with just such a degree of ethnic purity. Punta Huentemó, like Punta

Pirulil, right at the opposite end of that immense expanse of beach, are inevitable targets for backpackers, with their loathing for modern vehicles. Such is their enthusiasm that they are willing to walk those twelve kilometers, set up their tent for the night, return to Cucao the following day for a shower and a square meal, only to set off again on the same itinerary.

Machu Picchu – normally one of the requisite stop-offs – is another of the attractions for young people who delight in contemplating an incomparable sunrise, but it is too much of a tourist spot, inevitably a *déjà vu*, even for those arriving on foot along the Camino del Inca (Inca Road). Then of course, there are the vans driving up to the sanctuary, and a hotel plagued with international guests. In Cucao, instead, things are different. It is just they and this majestic landscape of solitude and magnificence. Which is why, no matter the season, there are always young people walking, absorbed in this incomparable territory.

At the agreed time, I was back at the Álvarez home, where I was welcomed into the homely scene round the kitchen fire, so typical of Chiloé. Exequiel vividly recalls Lotte Weisner's first visit to Cucao, even though he was only eleven. He also recalls the culture of the time, that Huilliche identity forged over centuries, before it was erased by changes which, like the 1960 earthquake and the devastating *tsunami* that followed it, destroyed everything in their wake. Now, at fifty-four, he is able to provide a different viewpoint for the phenomenon taking place in Cucao, where the population, strangely enough, has hardly increased. When Weisner went methodically over the area in search of information there were around five hundred inhabitants. Today, over a quarter of a century later, the number is still under eight hundred. Just as happens in Frutillar, youngsters leave their hometown for the cities, in search of a job and a steady income. Some are determined to improve their training, by taking college classes, while others get jobs in the salmon fisheries where few of them ever become more than easily replaceable daily workers, albeit financially independent. The striking thing about it all is that though Frutillar and Cucao are utterly different, the consequences are the same. What could blonde Lutheran young people – facsimiles of German youth – living on the edge of a peaceful lake presided over by a volcano possibly have in common with the native inhabitants on the western coast of the island? The truth is, absolutely nothing and yet, they all suffer from the same evils brought on by our post-modernistic society. The irony in it all is that just as the Nazis were bent on preserving the purity of the Aryan race, these indigenous islanders cling almost desperately to their Huilliche heritage.

“It is increasingly older people who are out working in the fields,” says Exequiel Álvarez. “Young people are dazzled by the city, by being able to earn a salary, by consuming. If the fishing and salmon industry in Chiloé were to fold, we'd be in deep trouble.”

Álvarez minimizes the impact of a bridge across the Chacao channel, the inevitable cultural consequences, floods of cars and tourists, and their unavoidable effects on island culture.

“Our native indigenous culture has long been lost, and so have our ancestral customs and traditions,” he declares. “Everyone goes around with a mobile phone. There's a camping site in Cucao where they have Internet and you even see Huelde Indians logging into the Web.”

Imagine the perplexity of an observer watching these Indians downloading electronic mail, or dialing a number from the phone book in their state-of-the-art chip-equipped cell phones. How different from Exequiel Álvarez's ancestors, or even his parents' generation, when the gold fever hit Cucao and it was somewhat hastily



believed this mineral would signal profound economic transformation for the region. It was obviously not like the gold rush in California, in the mid-nineteenth century, for it did not lure thousands of people from the remotest points of the earth out to the western coast of Chiloé. But the fact is, there *was* gold on that vast wave-swept beach, and there still is. I had the chance of seeing some gold nuggets found in the area, which were deposited in my hand by the articulate Chiloé-born anthropologist and intellectual, Pedro Rubén Azócar, whom we will be talking about later in this book. He maintained Cucao gold was not top quality.

This did not prevent a number of gold-mining companies from settling in the area, for everyone knew of the existence of this mineral in the area in 1895. This southern “gold-fever” had features of its own, for it contributed to the psychology so typical of early twentieth century adventurers, from the legendary Julio Popper, king of Páramo<sup>2</sup>, who found gold on the eastern coast of Tierra del Fuego, to Chiloé writer Francisco Coloane, who worked as a young man on *estancias* in the area and used these legendary characters as inspiration for his masterly tales. Gold was a significant driver in the lives of these men, as Coloane points out in this fragment from *Tierra del Fuego*:

*The setting sun left other large gold nuggets along the edge of the streaming horizon of Tierra del Fuego: golden clouds the twilight used to set fire to its ever-changing chimeras.*

*But Schaeffer, unaware of the sunset, still felt the sun warm in his hand, the same color, and the color of the most coveted and malleable of all metals.*

*Julio Popper may have invented his renowned gold harvester, yoking the mighty bull of the sea to the yoke of his resourcefulness, yet on that far off beach in Tierra del Fuego nature had also devised a harvester of its own.*

*It was a natural phenomenon in Tierra del Fuego, for while elsewhere gold nuggets and flakes are wrenched from their quartz beds and dragged along by the rivers, on these coasts they are tossed about by the strength of the waves and wrenched from the ocean bed, the Atlantic coast and even the cliffs when the tide is high.*

This led to the arrival, in 1917, of the *Compañía Orera Consolidada de Cucao* (Cucao Consolidated Gold Company), which, by the early 1930’s, had replaced in technique and equipment the rudimentary systems employed by the locals to extract gold. But, as so often happens in this kind of gold rushes, their success was short-lived: in 1942, the foreigners admitted they had overestimated the amount of gold in the area, and opted out. As though to settle the matter for good, the 1960 earthquake and the apocalyptic *tsunami* that exploded onto the coast buried the gold fields under tons of sand leaving them several meters below the surface. Deep down under those sand dunes in Cucao that backpackers trudge across on their way to Punta Huentemó the most precious of metals still lie concealed.

Exequiel Álvarez is a man who knows how to search for gold. What is the indefinable, primitive link that draws human beings to this mineral, a link dating back to biblical times? The value of gold was, and still is, not only commercial but also symbolical, so much more significant than petroleum, no matter the market fluctuations. Man’s search might be defined as exacerbated individualism, for it can well be carried out alone, while unleashing the fiercest and most primitive of passions when it comes to

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<sup>2</sup> A peninsula in Tierra del Fuego

sharing out the gains. And there is always in those who search for it a spirit of adventure, which ultimately overcomes any frustration. It was perhaps this that led to Exequiel Álvarez's rare premonitory awareness that gold might change his life. Though a man of many facets, capable of doing farm-work, building houses, fishing with nets in the sea, and even making the nets – to name only a few of his multifarious activities – it was, however, gold that enabled him to become the most prominent entrepreneur in Cucao. After a frustrated sojourn in Santiago, where there were no openings for him, he set off for the Argentine region of Tierra del Fuego, close to the city of Río Grande, where he worked for three years at the agricultural school belonging to that Salesian order. After managing to save up some money he set out on his adventures, with the passion usually experienced by gold diggers. And, like the pioneers of old in California or Klondike, Alaska, he found it. The gold he found in the region of the Magellan strait was not part of a rich vein concealed in the heart of the earth, but rather small nuggets strewn along the coasts. Nor could it be said he discovered Eldorado, or *Cerro Potosí*, but what he found was enough.

"I found most of the gold in Port Williams, on the Beagle channel. Also on Lennox Island. Actually, there is gold all over the place, for the sea washes it onto our coasts. Wherever there is a raging sea and wind, there is likely to be gold on the shores. Gold digging means being insistent. If an explorer is bored after a couple of months, he'll never strike gold. You have to keep on and on. Another problem is there is no certainty of making money straight away. So often I left home with money in my pocket and was forced to return after a time without a cent. But you always go back to look for gold. It's an irresistible attraction."

During his youth Exequiel managed to get fifty grams of gold a day on Navarino Island, in the Magellan Strait. He had built a gold-washing machine, an ingenious system for separating the precious metal from the sand. Over the years, his adventures became increasingly dangerous, culminating in his decision to search for gold on the tiny beaches imprisoned by the Pirulil cordillera, south of Cucao, inaccessible by land. Dazzlingly beautiful when seen from the air, these virginal beaches staunchly deny access to all but those daring souls with the nerve to attempt to reach them from the sea, which is just what Exequiel set out to do on his tiny boat. Imagine the scene just for a moment. Few places in the world are so isolated, or have such an appalling, unpredictable climate. Here the waves crash violently against the cliffs and beaches, with a perpetually deafening roar. Yet there are few landscapes with more appeal. Exequiel sailed those waters and reached the shore defying the breakers on those desolate beaches. And it was his perseverance, the projects he dreamed of, his unquenchable spirit of adventure and his sheer tenacity that eventually bore fruit. He found gold, and that provided the means for him to buy land in Cucao and establish a basis for a variety of enterprises.

At the age of fifty he decided to pause in his multiple activities and set off once again on his adventures, in the company of one of his children and two friends. They sailed from Quellón, the southernmost port in Chiloé, protected by the archipelago and went from cove to cove until they finally came upon what they had gone in search of: a precious metal which contributed to their life being surprisingly malleable, like the very stuff they had discovered.

The isolation of Cucao from time immemorial until the arrival of the gravel road in the 1970's meant the Huilliche culture had been kept intact. This culture was now,

however, in dire danger. Over the last twenty years the town's inhabitants have had to struggle not solely with salmon fisheries and cell phones but also with another reality that has transformed their lives. The creation of the *Parque Nacional Chiloé*, in 1982, was crucial in preserving local flora and fauna. How else could the native forest be preserved, the legendary *tepual* that can only be traversed by placing logs across the path, for the roots emerging from the ground, the excessive humidity and the mire make it impossible to forge ahead. Or the tiny *chucao*, a startling, irresistible little bird with a characteristic and particularly strident cry, which sounds as though it is intent on defending its territory. Countless theories seek to explain what its song presages, depending on whether it comes from the right or the left. Definitely, a national park was required. But the Huilliche descendants were left enclosed within the confines of the park, with no property deed over the land and not allowed to cut down – ever – a single tree, which was practically like signing a death sentence for a culture, which for centuries had depended on wood.

The purest Huilliche blood runs through the veins of Enedina Chodil, one of the people affected by the *Parque Nacional Chiloé*. Her small wooden house is located in Chanquín, just beyond the old timber bridge across the river, though authorities are building a concrete bridge. Actually she has already moved into this home, built with a government subsidy, and equipped with electric lighting and essential home appliances, from a television set to a refrigerator. It was not always like this, though. Before she had to cross over the bridge and walk about a mile to a house lit by night with gas lamps, lost in the midst of the dunes formed by the 1960 tidal wave. At forty eight, Enedina has experienced two clearly differentiated cycles in Cucao: the primitive isolation of a village which could only be reached by crossing two lakes, and where she was seldom, if ever, disturbed, and the age of globalization during which the natives were paradoxically deprived of the lands of their ancestors.

“At that time we were completely isolated,” remembers Enedina, “and we had to go out and sell stuff just to survive. We didn’t even have plastic at the time: we used wood to make dishes. And if we happened to fall ill, we were in the hands of God, for there was no doctor. Sometimes we made do with a *machi*, or witch doctor. Babies were born at home, and there were women who came to give a hand during the delivery. That was the way I was born.

Years ago the whole region was known as Cucao. Nowadays different territories have been staked out: Chanquín and Paligue, which is where she now lives. Locals seek to avoid losing their native names. Yet other irreparable losses have come about, for postmodernism has all but demolished many Chiloé traditions of old, such as bartering. “People have got used to getting money. Bartering was our way of doing business on this island until not so long ago. Now, unfortunately, they all prefer to talk in ‘pesos’”, she says, mechanically rubbing her index finger and thumb together. Cucao has even lost the *minga*.

This remarkable Chiloé institution, the *minga*, must be unique in the world. What it actually involves is helping to harvest potatoes or do other agricultural work, without getting anything in return! The community, supportive and caring, seeks to help its members deal with their problems. The family receiving this communal aid would, in the best of cases, slaughter a pig, or a lamb, roast it on a spit, and share it with those who had helped them. Yet there is another form of *minga* still practiced in Chiloé that sometimes mystifies visitors, and which involves taking a house from one place to another. This conjuring act is feasible because homes are not built on a cement foundation, but rather on a wooden structure, a sort of skeleton frame to avoid the overpowering damp filtering up through the floor. A yoke of oxen can drag the house –

mounted on rolling logs – along roads and bridges, up and down steep slopes, until it is ultimately deposited at its final destination. This system has been used even for transferring small churches, like the one by the side of the tarmac road between Castro and Dalcahue. But this *minga* which all the neighbors take part in is never more astounding than when it is done across water. The home is dragged as far as the nearest beach – if its owners wish to take it to another island, for instance – and is then floated onto the water where a launch tows it seaward. This iceberg-like edifice, a third of which is submerged, makes its way across the peaceful waters of the archipelago until it finally reaches dry land. Imagine the amazement of a tourist seeing the pointed larch-tiled roof or tiny windows looking out over the roof during the home's ghostly sail through fjords and marshes.

Enedina is sitting by her refrigerator, an appliance she obviously feels attached to. The coming of electricity has changed her life. How different from her childhood days! She was born in Huentemó, that hypnotic place backpackers feel so drawn to, where she lived in a rustic hut, with no electricity, no television, no cell phone, no cars. They rode to Cucao on horseback, across the broad, windswept beach, defying the cold and the incessant winter rain. Yet she still yearns for those years she remembers as being marvelous.

She owns the land she lives on, and the relief of knowing she has a deed to protect her against eviction to make way for another national park, or for any new commercial or ecological enterprise is a goal she and other *Cucahuanos* have long been fighting to achieve. That unusually warm and sunny day in December when we chatted in the tiny living room, she could hardly contain her excitement: in only a few days the National Board for Indigenous Development would at last grant her the long-awaited deed free of charge. Not that any of this came out of the blue. Nor was it due to unexpected generosity from the Chilean government. It was, rather, the consequence of a process paradoxically set in action by globalization. As will be seen later, when the Huilliche descendants eventually realized their rights would never be recognized by the powers that be, that the international salmon fisheries would always have preeminence, they decided they would no longer hold the place of a picturesque group of natives to be exhibited to tourists and would, instead, get organized.

As so often happens in Latin America, there are two rival indigenous groups in Chiloé vying for recognition, one of which is the Federation of Huilliche Communities, where I first met Enedina Chodil. It was on the first floor of a tiny wooden house in Castro, in the heart of the block, where she regularly goes for information and training. Which is why her speech is not that of an Indian woman who has been isolated from the world. It is the speech of a postmodernist woman, fluent in the terms used at colleges and companies, who has learned the meaning of conceptualization.

These are the weapons she is fighting with and there is no doubt she will make full use of them to defend her ancestral rights to the bitter end.

Cucao was not without its large landed estates. During colonial times they were held by the Spanish *encomenderos*, and in the mid-nineteenth century were sold into the hands of foreigners who had little in common with Hispanic culture but were willing to start up enterprises here at the ends of the earth. This was precisely what happened with a Scotsman, by the name of John Christie, who came to these remote lands in 1842, only a few years after Charles Darwin. It is interesting to consider a fragment written by the British naturalist about Cucao in his *The voyage of the Beagle*, to provide at least some insight into the kind of scenery John Christie came upon less than a decade later.

*The district of Cucao is the only inhabited part on the whole west coast of Chiloe. It contains about thirty or forty Indian families, who are scattered along four or five miles of the shore. They are very much secluded from the rest of Chiloe, and have scarcely any sort of commerce, except sometimes in a little oil, which they get from the sea-blubber. They are tolerably dressed in clothes of their own manufacture, and they have plenty to eat. They seemed, however, discontented, yet humble to a degree which it was quite painful to witness. These feelings are, I think, chiefly to be attributed to the harsh and authoritative manner in which they are treated by their rulers. Our companions, although so very civil to us, behaved to the poor Indians as if they had been slaves, rather than free men. They ordered provisions and the use of their horses, without ever condescending to say how much, or indeed whether the owner should be paid at all. In the morning, being left alone with these poor people, we soon ingratiated ourselves by presents of cigars and maté. A lump of white sugar was divided between all present, and tasted with the greatest curiosity. The Indians ended all their complaints by saying, "And it is only because we are poor Indians, and know nothing; but it was not so when we had a King."<sup>2</sup>*

This was the scene John Christie came upon in 1842, and it was just by chance that he arrived in Chiloé – for his family owned ships that sailed towards Asia and Africa – or, perhaps it was simply the fact he was unable to come to an agreement with an uncle who upon the death of his parents had been appointed executor of their estate. Little is known about him, and he is little more than a genealogical rarity. It was his son, Robert Christie, who became prominent in the history and economy of the island, for towards the end of the nineteenth century he bought eighty thousand hectares of forestland, and created the Quilán estate, part of which is still maintained today. President Balmaceda, gave some of the lands to him in lieu of payment for services rendered, and others he purchased. His grandson, Otto Sahr Christie, bought part of the estate from his grandfather, setting in motion a tale which, as we will see later, would one day be repeated.

The particularity of the Quilán estate is that it belongs to Cucao, though in actual fact, the reverse is true, for the small town is practically contained within the boundaries of this gigantic estate. Eighty thousand hectares may sound outrageous to anyone unaware of the topography. These were not prairies or undulating slopes, but rather a dense, impenetrable forest, with no paths, which meant the modest facilities could only be reached after a fatiguing ride on horseback from Lake Huillinco, further up the mountain. But don Otto Sahr Christie loved this land, which he took over in 1944. And strangely enough, it was his grandson, Patricio Aguirre, who bought the last twenty thousand hectares left off him, for the estate was not economically profitable, and a large number of debts had to be paid off. Why would Aguirre buy all these hectares overrun by forests, economically unproductive, where at the best of times no more than five hundred head of cattle could graze? Perhaps he was driven by the same reasons as his grandfather: a love of nature and the dream of turning Quilán into a private park, an unusual ecological sanctuary.

It was Renato Cárdenas, the writer, that inextinguishable cultural icon of Chiloé, who first spoke to me of Lake Tepuhueico and said I simply could not leave the island

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<sup>2</sup> The King of Spain.

without getting to know its amazing forest, the *tepual*, and the lodge Patricio Aguirre had built in the middle of nowhere to welcome nature lovers. On a bleak, rainy day I headed for the estate, exploring on the way a road at times formidable, both because of its beauty and because of the obstacles to be overcome.

“It’s very easy,” Patricio had told me over the phone, “you simply follow the road that starts at Lake Huillinco.”

However, what may be easy by the standards of someone born in Chiloé, may be crazy to a foreigner. Like the wooden bridge similar not in size but in vulnerability to the one built over the River Kwai – but perhaps this was merely a subjective suspicion, for Chiloé timber is particularly resistant. Perhaps it was sheer instinct, or the proximity of nightfall, that helped me to make the right decisions each time I came to a fork in the road. On an incline rising to unexpected heights, where the winding path ran between gigantic *nalcas* – enormous ferns in the shape of elephant ears – I came to a place where the view suddenly seemed to go on forever. The forest fell away below me and another mountain surged up ahead, almost ghostly in the weird contrast of the sunlight shining through the rain and causing rare, shifting areas of light and shadow. I felt as though I was no longer in Chiloé, but rather on a path lost in some place like Sri Lanka – particularly when a flock of iridescently green parrots took flight up ahead, their shrill screeching the only noise cutting through the dense forest. It was, perhaps, the sheer power of the image, and the very thought of Sri Lanka that reminded me of a fragment by Paul Bowles in *The Sheltering Sky*.

*Death is always on the way, but the fact that you don’t know when it will arrive seems to take away from the finiteness of life. It’s that terrible precision that we hate so much. But because we don’t know, we get to think of life as an inexhaustible well. Yet everything happens only a certain number of times, and a very small number. How many more times will you remember a certain afternoon of your childhood, some afternoon that’s so deeply a part of your being that you can’t even conceive of your life without it? Perhaps four or five times more. Perhaps not even. How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty. And yet it all seems limitless.*

It was clear why *don* Otto Sahr Christie and his grandson, Patricio Aguirre, loved Chiloé above all else. Life without all that nature was something unthinkable. Where else would the primeval, the inaccessible, merge with runaway wondrousness other than in these unique forests around Cucao? But the current owner of what is left of the former Quilán estate is neither an introspective thinker, nor simply a champion of ecology. At forty-eight Patricio has become, instead, a hard-headed businessman, a real estate impresario who is not only aware of the struggle involved in merely subsisting, but of how to garner profit from a land which is impossible to cultivate, and from a forest that, exploited and razed by timber saws, would be equivalent to the worst of sins. And this is precisely the feeling a visitor gets on arriving at Aguirre’s *Parque Tepuhueico*, and built with reminiscences of edifices designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, just where the Pirulil cordillera emerges. It is what one would least expect to encounter in this desolate, dazzlingly beautiful location on the shores of Lake Tepuhueico.

Patricio Aguirre was waiting for me on the first floor of the circular construction or, as he doggedly insists on calling it, the lodge. After that somewhat eventful journey, and unusually cold weather for December, it was heartening to sit in that cozy room, by the fire, looking out onto a wonderful landscape of mountains and lake-water, savoring

*pisco sours* served in long-stemmed flute glasses. The wooden floors are so shiny that damage can only be avoided by walking round salons and bedrooms wearing woolen slippers.

“Unlike my brothers and other relations, my bond with this estate started during my childhood,” Patricio told me. “That is probably the reason why it has always had a peculiar, magnet-like fascination for me. But, of course, it is a long story, at times difficult and unusually harsh, which is ultimately the ordeal required to become a part of this land.

And it was in those early summers that Patricio Aguirre came to know Chiloé. This contact left a lasting impression on the fertile imagination of a child born in Santiago, the typical product of urban culture; and this impression was to shape the rest of his life. *Don Otto Sahr Christie*, his grandfather, and the owner of the Quilán estate, dabbled in a variety of businesses between Puerto Montt and Coyaique, in the south of Chile. From the time Patricio was ten, he would pick him up in December and return him to his home punctually in March. The child spent those months in Chiloé, not at a hotel in Castro, but on the estate, in a house close to the sea, with only the most rudimentary access. Imagine for a moment a young boy, far from the streets and noises of the city where he was born, sailing in a launch across Lake Huillinco and Lake Cucao, absolutely devoid of everything except the primeval power of the land, the impenetrable forests, the damp Pacific winds that flurried the lake waters; or perhaps setting out on a two-and-a-half-hour journey on horseback in the Pirulil cordillera, with the song of the chucao in his ears, and the dense humidity on his skin. His wonder must have been great. There, to the south of Rahue, in a house that still stands, Patricio spent his summers, no doubt unaware of what life, and that almost virgin land, had in store for him.

“One day things came to a head,” Patricio remembers. When I was still quite young I decided to buy twenty thousand hectares of the Quilán estate off my grandfather, there in the Lake Tepuhueico region. Time had brought to an end his Eden-like childhood stays, and Otto Sahr Christie, in the face of some financial difficulties towards the end of his life, decided to sell up all his land. A significant amount fell into the hands of banks, creditors and companies, while people remotely related to him inherited about ten thousand hectares. But Patricio Aguirre bought up twenty thousand hectares in 1985, and became the sole member of a legendary family to have land in Chiloé.

“This was no symbolic purchase,” he told me, “I devoted my first working years – and a good many of the following years – to paying off this debt, which was my greatest concern. This obligation and my attitude eventually ended up by affecting my marriage. Somehow these lands seemed to create antibodies and there was always someone who got hurt. I suppose the same thing had happened in my family in previous generations.”

We dined in a small room on the first floor, where we shared the meal with Patricia, our host’s current companion, and a young couple from Puerto Montt who had landed in their small aircraft at Castro’s tiny airport. Everything about the meal was planned to perfection, from the dim lighting to the customary sea salmon with Chiloé potatoes on the side.

A few years after buying the land off his grandfather, and once settled in Chiloé, Patricio was to come up against what he refers to as the worst time of his life, for suddenly his life shattered around him: the fishery he owned in Puerto Chacabuco encountered insoluble financial difficulties, while his marriage also foundered. Perhaps as a result of his despair, he considered a generous offer from a French company willing

to purchase his twenty thousand unexploited hectares of the Quilán estate for a timber project. Here, doubtless, was the solution to his problems. And it was then the internal struggle began: for this would mean letting go of those lands he associated with his childhood and of those summers with his grandfather which had touched him so profoundly; it would mean never returning to Chiloé, that unremarkable island where his forefather John Christie had come ashore in 1842. This did not involve selling shares in some anonymous company, it meant selling off his very roots. Strangely, what the French wanted to buy was the area round Lake Tepuhueico, which Aguirre still did not know: there were no roads, no way to get to this area, the most inaccessible part of the property.

However, at thirty-five, Patricio had already suffered the worst of solitudes, having to survive in a wild natural environment, in a merciless climate, relying solely on his own resources. This was not for a fortnight, or a month or the summer; this experience lasted a whole year.

“I wanted to become a man with a different perspective,” he said. “I left all my activities to someone else and holed up in a tiny timber cabin south of Punta Pirulil, by the sea (not far from the haunts of the Cucao Spirits, which he fortunately did not hear), where there was absolutely nobody. I felt the uncontainable need to be self-sufficient, to be able to subsist in those conditions. On thinking back I realize how different the project in my mind was from the actual experience I went through. I had taken a bag full of books, believing the isolation would encourage reading and intellectual introspection, an efficient way to avoid boredom. I wasn’t able to read a single book,” he admitted.

This was mainly due to his lack of experience in surviving in extreme conditions. Patricio spent a year entirely alone in this tumbledown construction, where lighting a fire and keeping it going was a challenge in itself. He had to set apart one day of the week for bathing, for he had to heat the kitchen range and then activate a water heater that worked by gravity. And then, of course, he had to keep himself fed. What could he eat in these lonely regions? A lamb was the best option. But he had never slaughtered one, nor did he know how to capture one, let alone cook it. But he learnt to do it. He stalked a wild goose – a very useful fowl in case of need – for three days before he was able to catch it. Yet the spiritual wealth this lengthy stay yielded was not limited to survival techniques but also included contact with the locals, those somewhat primitive beings who taught him how to tackle life from different perspectives. These natives of Cucao went out fishing or in search of gold.

“They were real teachers,” he confessed, “and I learnt to respect them. As far as survival was concerned they were much more capable than I was, which was why I needed both their help and their support. I ended up with a completely different impression of these people.”

But let us return for a moment to the French company that sought to purchase Patricio Aguirre’s lands. They took technicians to the area and Patricio went with them, for he had never been able to get as far as Lake Tepuhueico. While the research tasks were underway, he had an unexpected brainwave: to invite people to spend the weekend at these remote heights, sleeping in tents. The landscape, or more particularly, his deep-rooted affection for it, began to exercise irresistible influence over him, and it was then he took a determination that was to transform his life: he would not sell the twenty thousand hectares he had bought off his grandsire, Otto Sahr Christie. Without knowing exactly what it might be, he suspected there might be another alternative to avoid this heart-rending loss, for selling off the remainder of the Quilán estate would probably have been like losing a hand or an arm. It was the land of his forefathers, and he



suddenly found unexpected strength growing within him to defend it. In his hopelessness, he resorted to the only ruse he could think of, like a shipwrecked castaway clinging to a floating plank.

"I published a small ad in a Santiago daily, putting the land up for sale, pointing out it was a forest where there were neither paths nor access, and that the lands were undivided. This was a Saturday. On Monday I got eighty calls. I simply couldn't believe it."

Patricio's whole demeanor becomes animated at the mere memory of those uncertain, and at times, erratic days. It was like remembering a battle won, where the weapons were his roots and his imagination. It was probably not simply chance that made him publish that ad, but a much deeper, more unconscious act of defending to the very last a patrimony that held profound ancestral significance. Without further ado, he set his plan in motion. In three months, he had divided up the land; he then brought in topographers, and eventually managed to start a housing development. But his intention was not merely commercial: he knew that in order to preserve this last forest on the planet, the project had to be successful. From the very first he forbade having dogs and cats, cutting down trees, hunting, and building fences.

"A single cat," he warned, "is capable of doing away with an entire colony of birds."

Aguirre sought to avoid what has happened in other areas of Patagonia, where people little realized that introducing unfamiliar species could lead to ravages or environmental disasters. In Argentina, in the 1940's, a Navy officer took fifty beavers to Tierra del Fuego, little suspecting their astounding proliferation would lead to ecological upheaval as the dams they built blocked the course of rivers and streams. Nor is Patricio unaware of the fact that an ecosystem that took millions of years to form can be destroyed in a matter of minutes by an indiscriminate industrial process. Like all dreamers, in the positive sense of the word, Patricio knows the future of Lake Tepuhueico depends on his firmness, his business acumen and the opportunities provided by this unique virgin region. In fact, there are no more than a few houses along the shoreline of the lake, partly perhaps because the sale of the land did not turn out to be the boom he had expected, though he has achieved results on other fronts.

"There wasn't even the slightest environmental awareness here among businessmen, like the timber companies, whose only language was profitability. But they're changing and they've come to understand conservation is their first priority.

Meanwhile, visitors are made welcome by the locals, who are happy to teach them about the unique features of this singular forest. Which is precisely what happened to me the following morning, when I discovered I had been left alone in the lodge. With the exception of the staff, they had all returned to Castro, irresistibly drawn by the idea of flying the tiny aircraft belonging to the couple from Puerto Montt over the unusually beautiful southern coast of the island, which was impossible to reach except from the air. Adequately shod in knee-high rubber boots, I was accompanied by an employee out to the *tepual*, a forest of native *tepu* trees, found only in these remote regions. There was barely suppressed pride behind this man's rustic exterior as he showed off this treasure that existed nowhere else in the world. Life had given him another chance at work, for there was no longer a market for craftsmen or gold-diggers, now so entirely unprofitable. These people lacked schooling, but they had the wisdom of the earth, inherited from their ancestors. They knew each tree, each plant, and even the different sounds of the birds. The forest is a part of their very being.

The *tepual* was as extraordinary as I had imagined it. It is in no way like the Canadian or Patagonian forests, with gigantic species and fern-edged pathways. It is,

instead, a dense undergrowth of trunks and tentacle-like roots, rough, slippery soil, and nothing to provide sure footing along the narrow trails. How different from the *tepual* I had visited in *Parque Nacional Chiloé*, in Cucao, with its neat log paths, arrows showing the way forward, signs with the Latin names of each species. Here, instead, was the forest at its most primeval, hardly touched by man, and with the ever-present danger of getting lost. How to find my way in that murky labyrinth, sunless and intolerably humid, ducking under branches, trying to keep my balance in the swampy soil, with the song of the chucao as my sole reference? And for anyone suffering from backaches – as I do – this is not the most propitious of expeditions.

The cold rain continued to fall without respite, with surges of wind stirring up the waters of Lake Tepuhueico. I lunched alone in the tiny dining room on the first floor and then wended my way back along that hazardous path strewn with wooden bridges. I was later told that, despite the ominous weather, Patricio Aguirre and his friend had flown over the remotest regions of the mountains on the southern coast of Chiloé. They had gone unusually far south, as far as Punta Zorra, and then flown an impossible number of miles seaward in an attempt to catch a glimpse of a whale colony.

Some time later Patricio confessed to me he was pretty scared of flying out across the Pacific in such a tiny plane, but, like the forests, rivers and lakes which still form part of the Quilán estate, it was a simply irresistible adventure.

No doubt, if he were to live his life over, he would not hesitate to do it again, come hell or high water.

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## OF WARLOCKS AND MYTHS

Life in Chiloé towards the end of the nineteenth century was primitive, if this is understood as an acute sense of insularity and the awareness that this island, which marked the geographical end of Chilean culture, had developed beliefs of its own. Progress had not invaded the region as had happened in Santiago, nor was there a railway, or even roads. People traveled from one place to the other, if strictly necessary, by boat, unless they dared to defy the rudimentary log-crossed trails and the densely vegetated forest. Defying the creation of the Ancud diocese in the 1840's, and its bishop, monsignor Donoso, old beliefs in magic and witchcraft still lived on. The Chilean ecclesiastical authorities of the time were, however, apparently unaware of these beliefs, for in 1851 a synod was held in the traditionally Spanish stronghold of Ancud – on the northern coast of Chiloé – where no mention was made of the existence of necromancers, or even worse, of a sorcerers' society. Though the catholic authorities were aware of their presence, and of the black magic they practiced, they tended to view it as something trifling. After all, how much importance could be attached to a soothsayer who treated indigestion or other minor ailments, or to an obscure medicine man brewing love potions for desperate lovesick wenches.

Yet, the island of Chiloé in the late eighteenth century had seen the rise of an organization unique in its kind, not only because of the macabre wealth of demonic beings performing the most unlikely of functions, but also because it mirrored the power structure of the Jesuits and the Spanish authorities, with its Kings, Viceroys, Judges, Tax Collectors, Advisors, Chapter meetings, Land Commanders, Illustrious Representatives and Mayors. This society which could, among other things, determine who was to be sentenced to death, was known as the *Mayoría*.

Times, of course, have changed. By the middle of the nineteenth century, when the diocese of Ancud was created, witchcraft was a practice of the past and, to a certain extent, outdated. Incipient scientificism had robbed it of credibility while the church – both Catholic and Protestant – was implacable in its witch-hunts and burnings at the stake. In France, for instance, seventeenth century persecution reached its peak when the priest Urbain Grandier was tried in Loudun, in a trial which was no more than a legal and theological cover-up for other vested interests. Throughout the seventeenth century both Europe and North America were the scene of shocking trials and atrocious punishments for practicing witchcraft.

Chile was alien to the brutal witch-hunts instigated by Catholics, Calvinists, Anglicans and Lutherans alike in other regions. Yet nobody was unaware of demon possession. In 1653 Jesuit father Nicolás Mascardi, who later explored the south of what is now Argentina, where a lake is named after him, exorcized a fourteen-year-old native girl in the belief she was actually possessed by a demon. He took her to the church and, using a relic of Martyred Saints, performed a feat which, historically, would have aroused the envy of Sister Jeanne des Anges in the Ursuline convent in Loudun, who

was possessed by no less than seven demons, one of which was the fearsome Asmodeus.

Francisco A. Encina, in his *Historia de Chile (History of Chile)*, recreates this climate.

*The demon within her breast kept her tongue-tied, yet on finding itself on sacred ground, it became so agitated three men were unable to hold the young girl down.*

But the demon or demons that possessed her – Beelzebub, Behemoth or whatever other perverse fiend – were not easy to expel. The priest then resorted to the Custody of the Most Holy Sacrament, but all to no avail. The following day, during the second exorcism, Mascardi, supported by an image of Saint Ignatius (for he was, after all, a Jesuit) pronounced these precise words: “Por merita fundatoris nostra societatis”, which produced an instantaneous and unexpected effect: the demon left the body of the Indian girl by way of her left ear, and took on the shape of a dog. Saint Ignatius of Loyola had contributed to this miracle – for it was his image that expelled the devils.

But this had happened centuries ago. In Santiago no one was aware of the beliefs held on an all but destitute, futureless island lost in the Pacific Ocean, whose population had dared to refuse to support the early nineteenth century independence movements. Worse still, it did not even manage to rouse interest among anthropologists. Who, in Santiago, could take the time to stop and consider absurd witchcraft taking place in improbable regions, when Chilean economy was in full expansion, with railways multiplying at amazing speed and mining activity growing by leaps and bounds? The age of progress, in Chile, could not but hold in contempt a bygone culture that believed in witchcraft. These beliefs belonged to an obscure past, when the Enlightened Age or the Rights of Man, or the Industrial Revolution had not yet taken place in Europe. Yet in Chiloé they lived on. What no one expected, though, was that towards 1880 the Mayoría would gain so much power, that revenge would be the order of the day, that crime would become indiscriminate, and that in an effort to put an end to certain bloodthirsty practices, about one hundred warlocks would be put on trial in Ancud, and that many of them would be thrown in jail.

But prior to considering this apparent end – for the Mayoría continued its clandestine activities till the early decades of the twentieth century – it would be interesting to devote some time to the ancestral traditions of the Mapuche Indians, the forebears of the Chiloé Huilliche Indians, who dwelt in the south of Chile and had instituted shamanism, under the rule of one they termed the machi. In *Reyes sobre la Tierra (Kings upon Earth)*, an enlightening essay on witchcraft in Chiloé, Gonzalo Rojas Flores, mentions this institution.

Within the Mapuche religious system, the machis used to hold – and still do – a privileged position. The machi or Mapuche shaman was a person gifted with special spiritual powers – or psychic skills – which enabled him to go into a trance and communicate with spirits. This state of ecstasy was achieved by self-induced suggestion, rhythmic beating of his drum, dancing, inhaling tobacco, and often the use of certain hallucinogens.

The machi's responsibilities involved keeping supernatural evil forces at bay, prevent any damage they caused and restoring mental health by magic healing rites, while establishing a right relationship with the spirits of their forefathers, whose hostility could be the source of weakness and tension among the community.

The advent of Christianity in Chiloé, during the seventeenth century and particularly the significant role of the Jesuits, their missions, their Patron Saints, and the religious feasts the Chiloé peoples were expected to take part in, put an end to shamanism, at least as it was once understood by the Mapuches. The legendary ngillatún, a communal religious and cultural ceremony, was no longer performed, and the machis were relegated to the role of mere medicine men. No longer were they the demiurges mediating between men and the spirits on high, particularly the Mapuche deity Ngenechén. It was perhaps this among other reasons that led to the rise of a witchcraft society of the kind of the Mayoría towards the end of the eighteenth century.

It was in late 1786 that renowned Spanish seaman José de Moraleda y Montero, whose name endures in the main channel rising in the Corcovado Gulf, arrived in the Payos region of Chiloé. His was one of those customary exploratory journeys-cum-expeditions that came to survey the coasts of the island, and of the continent, manned by a crew in search of the mythical Caesars' City, which someone had declared lay in the proximities of the Palena river. Moraleda was simply one more of the legion of explorers who, from the time the first Spaniards arrived in Chile, heard the talk and set off in search of an amazingly rich city where all the buildings were made of gold and silver. Needless to say Caesars' City existed solely in people's imagination for it was never discovered. From Payos – today Queilen – the mariner sailed up the coast as far as Tenaun where an unexpected, and to a certain extent, historical event was to take place, though Moraleda never knew of its historicity. On January 16, 1787 the vessel sailed into the hamlet, where it stayed for only two days, just long enough for a memorable encounter, a duel and probably the birth of the Mayoría. It should be noted that this account, though true as regards dates and names, was, in its retelling, embroidered with unavoidable, indeed indispensable, exaggerations as it was handed down from generation to generation.

The truth of the matter was that another of the purposes of the journey was to embark a few Indians to take to Spain – not precisely an easy task. The vessel was therefore forced to sail along this coast, fjord-ridden and dotted with islands. At Tenaun Moraleda changed his strategy. He would no longer be the Spanish mariner, defender of the faith, a subject of His Most Christian Majesty, but would, instead, become a warlock to impress the natives. Moraleda therefore changed into a variety of animals: a pigeon, a fish, a wolf. The Indians must have been stunned. This man had formidable powers and such a dangerous presence should be counteracted at any cost. Someone would have to eclipse him, reduce him to the category of a minor sorcerer, make him feel as though his powers were insignificant in comparison with those they could display. But who? Only a legendary witch living a short distance away in Quetalcó had the powers required. Thus it was that a group of aborigines departed hastily in search of old Chillpila to confront this intruder, who seemed to be a senior warlock. Tradition has it that this native sorcière faced up to him with cool aplomb. She was not impressed. She tried to cast a few magic spells, which are unfortunately unknown to us, but which did nothing to dim Moraleda's performance. The situation must have been particularly tense, for not only was her prestige as a witch at stake, but if she failed the inhabitants of Tenaun would be at the mercy of this adventurer. But Chillpila held one last card, and she decided to play it. Moraleda's ship was anchored close to the beach, opposite Linlin Island, with the continental volcanoes in the background. The woman would have to do something much more important than simply turn into some vulgar little animal. After all, turning into a crow or an owl in these regions was nothing out of the ordinary. But

to make the mariner's vessel suddenly run aground, lying on its side in the sand, with its masts dangerously arched – now that was something else. That was major witchcraft.

And it is precisely what Chillpila did.

This hardened seaman must have been dumbfounded. The vessel he had used to cross the most fearsome of seas had been rendered useless, worthless, simply paralyzed opposite an absurd little village in Chiloé all because of a woman with more powers than Satan himself. But Chillpila was generous: with another spell she made the tide rise and the vessel was once again afloat and free. Voilá.

Chillpila accordingly stole the show and Moraleda – noblesse oblige – had no alternative but to admit his complete defeat.

This magic spell might not be as far-fetched as it sounds, though not in the twinkling of an eye, as tradition holds, but over a span of several hours. For the tides in Chiloé rise and fall seven meters each day. Whichever the case may be, this pyrotechnic spell indirectly contributed, not to the birth – for it was already brewing – but at least to the development of a fearsome society of warlocks and witches which was to dominate the island for a hundred and fifty years to come. In acknowledgement of her prowess, Moraleda presented Chillpila with a rare leather-bound tome, containing the most esoteric secrets and hexes. Some members of the Mayoría had allegedly seen this tome, which, however, turned out to be as cryptic and impossible to unearth as the legendary – and imaginary – Necronomicon, by Horace Lovecraft. The book was, most likely, a medical book which the Indians, in their ignorance and probable illiteracy, construed as the perfect formula for the occult. Moraleda left Tenaun two days later and went ashore at Quicaví, a nearby township buried in the heart of a particularly sheltered cove which he gave two names: España and Lima, names which, as will be seen, were later adopted by the incipient witchcraft society. And though their departure was affable, this did not stop him from including in his travel log the impressions these aborigines had had on him, describing them as “inclined to idolatry, very surreptitious, stealthy, vengeful, indolent drunkards”.

Chillpila, victorious, her prestige untouched, set off for Quicaví where she deposited the book, which eventually became something of a relic, for it was never moved from that place, and was cared for as though it were the original manuscript of the Holy Scriptures. But things were already taking place in this hamlet, which one hundred years later would be notorious as the epicenter of the Mayoría - things that presaged the age of witchcraft. For it was just around this time that the Cueva [Cave], or Casa Grande was built in the environs of Quicaví, a place where the most senior warlocks of the new society gathered, a sanctuary of horror. The trial in Ancud against the Chiloé necromancers in 1880 disclosed several features of this subterranean haunt, which acolytes gained entry to through a grass-covered doorway in the roof. The lock on this doorway could only be opened with an “alchemy key”, as it was known, though it was no more than an ordinary metal key.<sup>3</sup> The statements made during the trial by Mateo Coñuecar, one of the members of the Mayoría, provide some insight into the kind of demonic beings peopling this cave. The following is a sample of the transcripts:

*Twenty years ago, when José Marimañ was king<sup>4</sup>, he was ordered to go to the cave with meat for some animals that lived inside. He complied with the order, and took them the meat of a kid he had slaughtered. Marimañ went with him, and when they reached the cave, he started dancing about like a sorcerer, and quickly opened the*

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<sup>3</sup> At the time keys and locks were normally made of wood in Chiloé. Metal was practically unknown.

<sup>4</sup> As will be explained later, the title “king” was part of warlock hierarchy.

*entryway. This was covered over with a layer of earth (and grass to keep it hidden) and under this there was a piece of metal with the alchemy key. He used this to open the entryway, and was then faced with two completely disfigured beings which burst out of the gloom and rushed towards him; one looked like a goat for it dragged itself along on four legs, and the other was a naked man, with a completely white beard and long hair down to his waist. This one was known as “Ibunche” and the other as “Chibato”.*

*...Both of these appeared at the time to be around fifty, and these personages had dwelt there ever since the cave was first founded, replaced by others when they died.*

*This was how they chose them: the council met and decided who would be the Ibunche and the Chibato and even though they were unwilling, they were taken by force and locked up in the cave. There they were taught to live as tradition required; they weren’t allowed out anywhere, and were continually fed on goat or kid meat, or the meat of dead children stolen from the pantheon.*

Mateo Coñuecar, who reported some details of the Cueva, was sentenced to three years in prison. Cristino Quichén and Domingo Coñuecar, to 541 days in prison. There were lesser punishments for other members of the Mayoría. But what should be clear is that they were not condemned for believing in magic, or for their supernatural powers, but for committing crimes clearly typified in the Chilean criminal code, such as homicide, as a direct result of a death sentence pronounced by the Mayoría. Whichever the case may be, the punishments were overly benevolent considering the unrestrained bloodletting and revenge involved.

There are several theories as regards the origins of witchcraft in Chiloé. The most acceptable of these is that it arose from a rare mix of European and native culture, undoubtedly leading to a plethora of unique major and minor deities of darkness. Yet its originality lies mainly in its having spawned an organization like the Mayoría, also known as Recta Provincia, with its complex system of authorities, laws and administration. But before considering this singular structure, it might be worth considering some of the demonic beings peopling the gallery, and the entryway into this esoteric world.

We should firstly define the Warlock, his initiation and the ceremonies around this course. As has already been noted, the very epicenter of witchcraft was – and some maintain, still is – Quicaví (from quin, knowledge and cahuin, gathering for learning), located between Quemchi and Dalcahue, now a veritable legend.

How does a warlock get into the sect? By following clearly established initiation rites. The contender is rigorously selected and then submitted to a series of tests to determine his aptitude and selflessness for the cause. He is required to taste highly indigestible food, freezing baths in the open air in the middle of winter, carry out ambushes on lonely roads and, last but not least, spend a whole night lying on a tomb in the cemetery. But this is not the end of the admission ritual. He must also be willing to sacrifice one of his family members, if so required by the supreme masters, and to further increase his wisdom by spending some time locked up with a lizard tied round his forehead with a red kerchief. He is then ready to be taken to the Major Cave where he will be presented before the highest authorities gathered together under the rule of the “Buta” who presides over the meeting.

This sorcerer’s apprentice is, however, asked to make contradictory vows and oaths. He is required to accept the devil while concurrently accepting their “Moral Code”, forbidding certain behaviors, such as stealing and raping women. Now the

necromancer will be ready to fly over forests and hills, for he has been vested with the “Macuñ”, a sort of magic jacket made of the skin from the breast of a woman who has died a virgin. But before soaring off into the air he will be required to perform several rites, such as following a salt-free diet, and will only be considered ready when one of his eyes starts to water. Then comes an almost theatrical move, which involves throwing back his poncho, to leave his Macuñ fully exposed, and finally, pronouncing magic words such as “arrehualhue”, an effective invocation to Satan which will enable him to ascend and glide through the air at vertiginous speed. The powers of the Brujo are – in the mind of Chiloé natives – overpowering. His enemies might suffer from injuries ranging from “sajaduras”, or profound slashes, to the fearsome “Llancazo”, a slow death by poisoning leading to breathing difficulties and, eventually, asphyxia.

Needless to say, these initiates require an ad hoc hideout like the “Cueva”, the Witchcraft Headquarters, presided over by thirteen warlocks and guarded by El Invunche, a sort of native version of Rosemary’s Baby. None better to define this than Bernardo Quintana Mansilla in his *Chiloé Mitológico (Mythical Chiloé)*:

*To get their hands on an Invunche, the necromancers steal a first-born child off its parents, before the infant is nine days old. The babe is taken to one of the areas in the Cueva; if the child has been baptized, the baptism is razed off, and one of his legs is broken and twisted until it sticks out his back. At three months the little one’s tongue is split in two and his skin is rubbed daily with a concentrated brew of “Huiripinda” and “Picochihuín” leaves. During those first months the child is fed on the milk of a black cat, and later on human flesh stolen from cemeteries. With this treatment the infant is made to lose his human appearance and is transformed into a hideous anthropophagic fiend.”*

Naturally, this monster does not speak, only bleating pitifully when hungry. This Temple Keeper (who watches over the Cueva) will only let in those who pronounce the required watchword from a nearby tree. The beast’s gruesome appearance, however, does not mean it will be allowed to live: at a certain age, it is sacrificed by the Warlocks and its flesh is turned into a sort of magical charqui to be distributed all over the island.

Among the minor deities in Chiloé witchcraft, it is, perhaps, La Voladora (The Flying Woman) who carries off the first prize. Endued with unusual charisma, she is the envoy of the gods, bearing instructions all over the archipelago. Once chosen by the sorcerers’ summit, the woman is locked up in a dark room where she is required to drink a warm potion, specially concocted by a skilled warlock, made of the juice of a natri – a fruit found only on the island, mixed with wolf-oil. The brew is so disgusting the woman vomits up her entrails, which are neatly folded away in a ciruelillo<sup>5</sup> wood box, which must be concealed. As if by magic the woman becomes a long-legged bird known as a bauda and flies off to fulfill her mission. Her caws are the most unpleasant sounds ever to fall on human ear. Upon her return, she seeks out her bowels, swallows them down, and once again becomes a woman. Unless, of course, someone has hidden the entrails away, or destroyed them, in which case La Voladora will be doomed to be forever a bauda. This myth is oddly related to Prometheus, whose entrails were devoured by vultures and then regenerated by night.

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<sup>5</sup> A tree native of Chiloé



The problem is that when La Voladora is condemned to being a bird forever, she cannot be distinguished from the other *baudas* at sundown, seeking food on the beaches of Chiloé. Unable to tell them apart, each bird is suspect, and it is no wonder the Chiloé natives so loathe *baudas*.

But there is another bird – related to wisdom in the Greek world – which can arouse as much terror as La Voladora. The *Coo* is no more than a nocturnal owl, hired perhaps by a sorcerer, inveterately set on approaching people's windows on stormy nights in Chiloé. The sight of these birds, flapping their wings and knocking on the windows with them, will make even the hardest in the home shudder. For the owl is not trying to get into the house, but is, instead – to the anguish of those watching it – coming to announce imminent death to whoever is ill in the family.

There are many other minor deities at the service of necromancy, ranging from the *Caballo Marino* (Sea Horse) to the *Mandao*, from the *Deñ* to *El Vilpoñi*. These are simply secondary deities and each of them contributes to keeping witchcraft alive. *Las Pirimán*, for instance, are neither sisters nor a local folk music group. They are, in fact, two terrifying tiny black stones, also endued with animal life, for one of them is male and the other female. Their purpose is to increase the fruitfulness of the land and the animals scattered around on it, though if used against their enemies, they have the power to destroy crops and make sheep fall ill.

The strange, and arguably unique, thing about the witchcraft society in Chiloé was its well-oiled organization, its territories and monarchs, devoted most conspicuously to imparting what its members considered justice, and collecting their annual contributions. And it was known as *Mayoría* (Majority) not because it was related to the numerical plane, but because it was made up of elders [*“mayores”*], that is, those who possessed the wisdom provided by their years, by what life had taught them. Perhaps for cabbalistic reasons it had thirteen members. The island and archipelago (where it would, no doubt, be appropriate to speak of the *Recta Provincia*) were divided into two kingdoms, or, to use a more appropriate definition, the territory had two kings: the ruler of *Payos*, who was higher in rank, and the ruler of *Quicaví*. But because of the secret nature of the witchcraft society, each locality, each village, had a different name from the one mentioned on the map, as though this change would not only encourage secrecy, but also magically re-create a geography. *Quicaví* was known as *Lima* or *Salamanca*; the *Payos* region was *España*; the island of *Abtao*, North America; *Tenaun*, *Santiago*; *Achao*, *Buenos Aires*. Possibly the basically low cultural level of the sect members, led to new denominations being located in Chilean, Spanish or Latin American cities. There was no locality by the name of *London* or *Paris*.

And the “sovereigns”, just as their medieval European peers, imparted justice and decided who would live and who would die. It was common practice for someone feeling resentful to resort to the king to seek vengeance. The setting was not, of course, that of medieval Europe, for it lacked any pomp. There were no castles, or armor-clad soldiers, or battlemented halls, or gold-embroidered garments. The setting was extremely poor, with modest wooden huts and humbly dressed monarchs. But, perhaps somewhere in their imagination they felt they resembled erstwhile Jesuit or Spanish institutions, which they had copied their power and administration structures from.

This judgment pronounced by *Nahuelquin*, king of *Payos*, in 1849, might provide some insight into the extent to which they copied the forms of the colonial administration of old.

The Governor and the Parish Priest of Quenac along with citizens Luis Moil and Antonio Vivar shall be executed; the two former because of the fines and prison-sentences with which they afflict the peoples of Apiao and Chaulinec and the two latter for being informers. A courier from Salamanca<sup>4</sup> shall put our sentence into effect on one night, and they shall die a sudden death, unable to move their tongues. Pronounced in my office this twenty-fifth day of November eighteen forty-nine. Nahuelquin.

The vocabulary and style, rather than that of a Chiloé Indian, are reminiscent of those of the Capets or Plantagenets, in pronouncing a death sentence.

Yet there are striking similarities between the Mayoría and some North American mafia organizations, as far as “contributions” are concerned. Towards 1920, in the larger cities in the east and Midwest of the United States, it was common practice for mafia chiefs to ask trades-people to pay a fee in exchange for “protection” to keep their lives and shops or businesses out of danger. And if they refused, no one took the trouble to write out medieval death sentences. Simply by nodding his head the gangster could have any rebel swept out of this world with a Thompson machine gun. Likewise, on a remote island of the Chilean Pacific, a witchcraft society collected an annual tribute off practically all the villagers to safeguard their welfare, to ensure they would have no accidents during the night, extending the protection to their families and property. Anyone who fell behind in their payments had to take charge of any additional costs involved, and woe to any who foolhardily persisted in refusing to pay, for they were summarily condemned to death.

However, just as happened among American gangsters or the Sicilian mafia – not as regards belief in magic, but as far as organization and hierarchy were concerned – there were among the members of the Mayoría struggles for supremacy and control over territories. These conflicts came to a head in 1849, when Domingo Nahuelquin, king of Payos, visited José María Merimañ, king of Quicaví, on the island of Caguach, for the execution of Luis Moil y Antonio Vivar. He demanded to see the king of Quicaví. It is not the purpose of this account to describe in detail the conflict that arose among these two men, but suffice it to say that the king of Payos was taken prisoner to the island of Apiao, brought before the Indigenous Communities Council and sentenced to death. He and his retinue were drowned in the sea with stones tied round their necks.

The 1880 court case against the warlocks of Chiloé dealt a deathblow to the Mayoría. It continued in activity, but without the power it had once had. Yet still today the figure of the Brujo holds a rare thrall over Chiloé dwellers, as though they still might actually believe in his existence. It is, of course, difficult to accept the supernatural in an island society that in the course of little more than ten years has suffered the impact of monumental changes, such as the salmon-fishing industry, mobile phones, satellite television, electronic bank transactions and surfing, not in the waters around the archipelago, but on Internet. Nevertheless, a profound, irrational belief still subsists around the existence of sorcerers and necromancers, able to turn into dogs to perform their esoteric activities, walk up walls and on roofs, and even fly. It’s not that these Chiloé natives actually believe in their existence, but neither do they write it off entirely.

And, just as in any self-respecting witchcraft liturgy, there are cryptic resources for recognizing warlocks, or for interrupting their flight. In the past, recognizing them involved knowing what to do in certain circumstances: hanging an open pair of scissors

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<sup>4</sup> This refers to Quicaví.

in the shape of a cross in the doorway could drive these devil's envoys crazy – like a cross or a string of garlic could do to Dracula, and they would stumble blindly around without being able to leave the dwelling. And, should anyone see a sorcerer in flight, there was a simple system to bring him down, like a rifle shot, though this required significant vocal practice: saying the Lord's Prayer – but backwards. Also, a cross could be traced in the air or on the ground with a knife, to make him plummet to earth. These old beliefs – or superstitions, as some would call them – must also have some indigenous roots. Descendants of the Indians in the Argentine pampas still draw a cross on the ground with a knife to “break” a storm and thus avoid wind or hailstorms.

The legendary Cueva in Quicaví was never discovered and, what is infinitely more macabre, nothing was ever heard of the Invunche and the Chivato. No doubt they were trapped in there after the trial in Ancud and starved to death. In time, the senior members of the Recta Provincia went dying off, among them the infamous Aurora Quinchén, “her majesty the Queen of machis and warlocks”. But, in fact, the trial at Ancud did not cause a devastating effect, for the Mayoría had by this time spread all over the archipelago. But the age of Kings, Viceroys, Tax Collectors, Mayors, in short, that imaginary European court, had forever come to an end.

It was a cold, overcast summer morning when I set off for Quicaví. I was spending the weekend at the home of writer Renato Cárdenas, in Calén, and two of the guests had offered to go with me: Alejandro Higuera, a friend of our host's, who was in permanent residence at the wooden house Cárdenas owns on the beach, and Laura, a young, attractive Spanish anthropologist, at the time a member of Cárdenas' almost perpetual entourage. The graveled road borders the sea and tapers off onto a sort of plateau, though not actually a mesa, for sheer slopes, unbelievable views and gorges are all part of the journey. The road is relatively new, and if anyone wishes to go down as far as San Juan or Tenaun, the slopes are surprisingly steep. Quicaví is a few miles from Calén and, as I mentioned previously, was the central hub of the Mayoría for over a hundred years.

What first strikes anyone on this journey is the peaceful setting, for it is a sea inlet forming a deep cove, with a few houses scattered along the shore and a small wooden church following the design so characteristic of that part of the island. An ill-prepared traveler might even believe he was in Norway, particularly if he caught sight of the fishing boats that provide a definitely Nordic touch to the scene. The question is, then, inevitable. How could such a peaceful, bucolic place have been in the past the home of a warlock society that committed all nature of crimes? There are still today locals who maintain that both sorcerers and paranormal phenomena are yet to be found. Even Renato Cárdenas confessed to me in Calén, before my departure, that he would never dare walk out alone at night in Quicaví. And this should be taken as a warning, particularly coming from one of the people who knows most about the myths, history and botany of Chiloé, to mention only a few of the fields he specializes in.

That morning it was the beauty of Quicaví, not its demonic undercurrents, that made an impression on me. The purpose of our visit was not simply geographical in nature. I was to interview Nelson Antoniz, teacher, resident, and a veritable authority on that reality so hard to apprehend. He lived in a large house facing out onto the cove, from which the small port and the larch-wood chapel could easily be seen.

“Most people in Chiloé believe in these warlocks with immeasurable powers, who are able to fly from one place to another,” Nelson Antoniz told me.

His is the voice of a middle-aged man, seated at the table, in typical Chiloé fashion. There are children playing in the room, and his wife – not missing a word of the conversation – never ceases in her chores. He confirmed an obvious suspicion for any mind of average intelligence: the onslaught of cell phones, television, salmon industry has led to young people no longer believing in such esoteric myths of old. What youth in a computer chat room, or doing online banking could actually believe in malignant flying beings, or in saying the Lord’s Prayer backwards? The mere possibility sounds preposterous. This is not the case, however, among the more elderly who, to tell the truth, believe it all.

“They are sure these mythical beings exist,” Antoniz continued, “because they see them and would swear blind they have seen the sorcerers flying around at night. They turn into animals, particularly dogs and birds. And it could be any bird,” he adds, “for instance, a stork. If anyone is ill and a bird comes and perches on the roof of their home, they are certain it’s a necromancer, intent on doing them harm. And, of course, they believe in La Voladora.”

Some deities, such as the Siren, have gradually disappeared from popular belief, but these relate more closely to Chiloé mythology than to witchcraft. After living so many years in Quicaví, Nelson Antoniz asserts wizards and such no longer exist. These demonic creatures, with that bewildering habit of turning into any animal, providing them with the best possible disguise, basically sought to harm others, sometimes at the request of a neighbor. There were even people who came from Santiago in search of a sorcerer who would aid them to do justice. The sick also sought out the necromancers – and some, according to Antoniz, were healed by self-suggestion. This service was naturally recompensed with money or a bottle of good liquor. At the entrance to Quicaví there was even a large stone where magicians were said to perch and launch themselves off into flight, as though it were a curious kind of launching platform. Though the exact site of the Cueva, where the Mayoría had its headquarters it still apparently an impenetrable mystery, our host maintains that in the neighboring hamlet of San Antonio de Colo there is a tunnel running along the edge of a gorge, apparently built by the Spaniards, and which could actually have been the Cueva.

“Of course, even though I don’t believe in sorcery,” continues Nelson Antoniz, “I can’t deny that really strange things have happened at Quicaví, things that have no explanation. And not way back in the past, either, but just recently. See that house?” he asked, pointing to a dwelling close to the port. “The strangest things took place there.”

And he proceeded to regale us with a very peculiar account, particularly coming from an agnostic. A couple with several children lived in the house, one of whom was the heroine of the story, a girl of seventeen, eventually accused of being responsible for mysterious deeds without explanation, which began to take place from one day to the next. What was going on in that peaceful home? When the family members were gathered together on the ground floor, they would hear someone dragging things around upstairs, on the first floor. On going upstairs to find out what was happening they would find the windows open, and all the beds stripped of their mattresses, which had somehow mysteriously been thrown out into the street. Or perhaps the family would leave the youngest child asleep in one bedroom and he would appear later in another. They would look for the plates to set the table, but they had all disappeared. With no explanation they would turn up in the yard. Or the potatoes and yams would suddenly no longer be in the kitchen, but scattered out in the street. All this could not, of course, have been done by a single person. It would have been physically impossible.

“All this is the absolute truth,” Antoniz assured us. “It lasted about a month. But when the youngest girl started moaning and sighing, and rare skin abrasions broke out all over her body, her parents called on me. I spent several nights there with them, and though nothing could be seen, things continued to move around. It was then I began to suspect this might not be witchcraft, but parapsychology – in short a poltergeist. Right from the first I had the feeling the seventeen-year-old had supernatural mental powers,” he concluded.

Exorcisms by the family priest had no effect on the paranormal phenomena. But it seems Antoniz was right: the “possessed” teenager wanted to go to Argentina, but her father would not let her. When she went to live with some relatives, things stopped shifting around, and the youngest soon got better.

We all sat round the table, absorbed in the account. Laura, the young Spanish anthropologist, took notes, while Alejandro Higuera, the permanent guest at Calen, waited restlessly to make his own contribution on the subject of witchcraft. He told us he was born in Puerto Montt and believed blindly in the existence of sorcerers in the area. He went so far as to admit that his family was forced to move away from the city because they were constantly harassed by these spell-workers.

“I was no more than a boy, but there are memories that will always plague me,” he admitted. “During the day strange dogs would climb onto the roof of the house in Puerto Montt. The same thing happened at night, and the noise wouldn’t let us sleep.

Scared by the thought of warlocks hanging around the home, his parents decided to move to Quemchi, in Chiloé, a beautiful little hamlet overlooking the inland sea. Alejandro was only eight at the time, but he will never forget how the remedy turned out being worse than the ailment: in Quemchi they were ferociously hounded by witchcraft. He defines the things that took place in the new house as “terrible”.

“My mother got up one night with a cramp in her face,” he recalls, becoming agitated. “We could hear someone walking around on the roof and my mother cursed whoever it was for being a necromancer. She hadn’t the slightest doubt about it. She started splashing holy water all over the house, but by this time the knocking and noises no longer came from the roof, but from the walls. No human being could have so much strength, unless endued with supernatural powers. I was so scared. I hid under the bed and burst into tears.”

For Alejandro, these are not simply anecdotes, but particularly traumatic experiences he evokes with absolute conviction, like one recalling a war or an act of violence. Nor is he able to forget the night his mother sent him to throw away the leftovers into the trash can outside; when he opened the door he came face to face with a huge black dog no one had ever seen before in Quemchi. He was terrified, and convinced the animal was a sorcerer. At the sound of his cries his mother rushed to the door with the holy water – her antidote against necromancers –, but the dog had disappeared, never to be seen again.

After listening to these accounts, I went with Laura to the center of the village, where there is a small wooden chapel, very similar to the San Antonio de Colo chapel, close to Quicaví. Why we wandered round it, why we took pictures with the chapel unequivocally in the background is no mystery. After so many esoteric tales and unlikely demonic beings, the tiny church seemed to offer us a mantle of protection, as though within that boundary demons, evil, and warlocks were out of bounds.

So much for warlocks and witchcraft. Nevertheless, Chiloé mythology has created its own deities to explain natural phenomena and human behaviors, and has even chosen places on the island for their gods and demigods to dwell. All of which points clearly to its particular insularity, culturally speaking, for their mythological beings are exclusive in nature. They are not shared with the rest of Chile. The fact that Chiloé is geographically a break-off from the continent, added to its intrinsic relationship with telluric catastrophe in all likelihood led to the creation of specific mythological figures. In times long since there must have been a massive cataclysm: suffice it to look at a modern map of the region to see that the Isla Grande de Chiloé and its archipelago, along with the hundreds of islands making up the seascape in the south of Chile, must once have been part of a single territory linked to the continent, prodigal in valleys and fertile lands, like some remote paradise. But at some undefined time in history a possible chain of earthquakes and tidal waves engulfed the land, causing part of the land to break away from the continent, and the sea to surge forward submerging all but these islands, once the high peaks the water was unable to swallow, and forming coves and fjords.

Those erstwhile inhabitants must have believed the end of the world was at hand – though not precisely in religious terms. Those who survived must have climbed those peaks or the trees on the slopes, and watched in horror as the sea engulfed it all, as the land sank beneath the water swallowing up people, animals, vegetation. It was precisely then that particular isolation came upon the region, that remoteness Chiloé was doomed to endure for centuries. The inhabitants on neighboring islands could be seen and heard, but they did not know anything about sailing, or building boats, which meant any communication or interchange was out of the question. The climate too had changed, and those waters, often so peaceful in the morning, might achieve apocalyptic dimensions by nightfall, when the wind blustered in fury. Yet there were still other realities to be discovered. The first was that the sea brought in unexpected treasures, for when the tide went down the seabed was littered with the most diverse variety of shellfish. Besides, there grew up in these ancestral inhabitants a mythical feeling derived from the occult forces that had unleashed the cataclysm. It was perhaps then the Chiloé deities were spawned. There was, too, a prodigious supply of trees on the archipelago, which provided the material to build tiny boats in which to move around the vast labyrinth.

One could surmise it was then Tentén-vilu and Coicoi-vilu came on the scene; these two goddesses, of senior consequence on the mythological scale, were bitter enemies and in perpetual strife. They were two gigantic snakes (vilu in Huilliche tongue means snake) representing good and evil in an openly Manichean manner. One day Coicoi-vilu, the water serpent, assaulted the region, cutting the island off from the continent, engulfing its valleys and submerging its inhabitants. Enter Tentén-vilu. This defender of the land was able to save from the clutches of the treacherous Coicoi-vilu what is today known as the island of Chiloé, protecting its dwellers, leading them to the high places, and endowing them with magical powers – such as turning into birds – so they could go freely from place to place.

But there was no happy ending. Neither has been able to prevail and the ongoing struggle means territorial balance is uncertain. The people of Chiloé are aware of this, particularly after having endured the 1960 earthquake and tidal wave. And in Chile, everything seems to be recurrent. A sort of royal family still exists, initially begun by the perfidious Coicoi-vilu, who delegated authority over the sea to the Millalobo, a mixture of man, fish and seal. His union with the Huenchula produced three offspring: la Pincoya, whose complicated rites provide and withhold fish and shellfish; the Siren,

living on a ledge of rocks on the island of Laitec, south of the larger island, and attracting mariners with her song; and lastly, el Pincoy.

It would be exhausting to list the mythical wealth of major and minor deities in Chiloé, ruling over air, land and sea. There are, however, some worth mentioning, particularly those with a variety of functions. El Thrauco is one of the strangest, because of this very diversity. This diminutive little man, stone axe in hand, makes his home in the forests, and is out to seduce young virgins. Narciso García Barria, arguably one of the major authorities on myths, and a prolific writer, defines this creature and searches out his profound significance in *Tesoro Mitológico del Archipiélago de Chiloé* (*Mythological Treasure of the Chiloé Archipelago*).

*No doubt this dogmatic outreach was the result of the religious elements the missionaries<sup>2</sup> contributed to indigenous mythology. They used it to enrich their preaching on Christian morals, without openly opposing the local mythical character, so useful to community life.*

*Despite all the physical and moral manifestations attributed to this outlandish creature, depicting it as evil because of the harm he inflicted on young girls, it is unquestionably a requisite creation, of great value to this primitive community divided into tribes. Its conception may originally have responded to the need for safeguarding social and moral integrity within the group. The creature may, however, have been intended to safeguard the stability of marital bonds in the monogamous system, or perhaps, have been charged with the custody of young virgins to protect them from premature abduction, thus preventing them from suffering the same fate as the Roman Sabines.*

*Just as adults might scare a child with talks of the “bogey man” or “ghouls”, this primitive community used the Thrauco to safeguard their moral standing and avoid young maidens frequenting the woods unaccompanied by someone to protect their virginal chastity.*

El Thrauco is, incidentally, the mate of La Fiura, a legendarily ugly fiend who also inhabits the forests and can paralyze men with her fearsome breath.

Mythology developed over centuries. Primitive men in Chiloé took hundreds of years to associate births and deliveries with sexuality. They were unaware that gestation took nine months and was the direct consequence of sexual union. Which in all likelihood led to the myths. If there is anyone with a thorough knowledge of myths, it is Renato Cárdenas, who provides a perfect definition in his *El libro de la Mitología, historia, leyendas y creencias mágicas obtenidas de la tradición oral* (*Book on Mythology, History, Legends and Magic Beliefs Taken from Oral Tradition*).

*The root of Chiloé myths is fundamentally Mapuche, though strongly influenced by Christian ideology and occidental cultures.*

*The mentality of the people on this archipelago is complex. Under certain circumstances they are coldly rational and practical. Under others, their decisions are emotional or defined by their traditions, where all that is religious, magical and*

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<sup>2</sup> This refers to the Jesuits

*mythical takes on significant roles. In their everyday reflections and in the way they act they make use of the diverse dimensions of their reality.*

*In rural communities, where most of the population lives, people still talk of, and to some extent believe in, mythical fauna and the stories around it. Chiloé myths involve fear, and most frequently involve accounts of witches or warlocks.*

*The personages in this world are viewed as extraordinary or powerful, but not supernatural. This is why they are able to face up to them. It is with this same fear and daring they confront their local Patron Saint when their wishes have not been fulfilled, or they pursue the Coos with red hot coals when they come to settle among their trees, bringing no good tidings with their guttural night-time chants. They can be controlled, nullified in their actions and even overcome.*

*The myths and beliefs are not the same for the people of Chiloé as for outsiders. Visitors dismiss their naïve accounts as fables and fantasies. To the islander these are things that have happened in some corner of time or under not too distant circumstances. They belong to and determine their lives.*

*Trying to penetrate the myth today means wandering in confusing terrains, disjointed, and often incoherent, for the womb that once held them together no longer exists. Today we can observe the myth like archeologists or Argonauts, in a cosmos disintegrated, eroded and fragmentarily adhered to a certain reality, within other cultures and other times.*

The myth had to explain, albeit in terms of magic, the reality around it. And it was thus other deities came to life, such as the Camahueto, the Basilisk, the Sea Horse and, arguably the most poetic of all these, the Caleuche. This a myth of fundamental significance in island culture, a phantom vessel sailing through the night, carrying the souls of dead sailors. Once again it is Cárdenas, in his writings, who takes this up to its true heights.

*The **Mariner**, the **Art Vessel**, the **Fire Boat**, the **Barcoiche**... all are talismanic names given to El Caleuche, that fantastic ship that takes music and light into the heart of the somber Chiloé channels.*

*Under certain conditions, like foggy weather, it can be seen or felt, unmistakable with its sounds of chains and parties, and the majestic outline of the training school.*

*To some it is a bodiless vision, sailing effortlessly through other craft. Yet others declare they have even attended parties on board, though they prefer to have them on dry land, where there are women. Arrangements are made with tradesmen who have a lot of daughters and **El Caleuche** supplies them with goods in return. It is thus the locals explain the rapid rise of some tradesmen who are never seen selling anything. These protégés of **El Marino** usually have black hens and tarred boats with **quilineja**<sup>6</sup> ropes.*

*The barcoiche can disappear at will, taking on the shape of a stone or a stick, and the sailors can turn into wolves or **cahueles** (dolphins). Another of its qualities is the extraordinary speed it can attain.*

*To be able to see it without being seen, any interested observer should put a clod of earth in his mouth, for the first thing they smell is a person's breath. There are some*

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<sup>6</sup> Climbing plants used for making brooms, among other things



trees a bystander can hide behind, like the **maqui** and the **tique**. People are scared of being carried off by the **Buque de Arte** or **Art Vessel**, so it is always advisable to take precautions.

There are many who believe the sailors on this ship have a leg sticking out of their back, like the **invunche**. Still others describe them as well-groomed people, wearing special garments, and having a particularly cold handshake. They are, in overall terms, correct in their dealings, and with the aid of their sea-bound collaborators, will save any castaways. There are those who believe their port is the **Ciudad de los Césares** or **City of the Caesars**, a wonderful place somewhere in the Andes where residents live on forever, like the **caleuches**.

Chiloé sailors recommend sailing should be done respectfully – no singing, no whistling, no roistering – for this angers El Caleuche and who knows what this might lead to.

The unfortunate Disney-like transformation – to use a term to clearly depict the “visual” deformation of these mythological deities – has to some extent eroded their credibility. Pictures or likenesses of La Pincoya dancing in the seas, randomly denying or providing fishermen with fish and shellfish, depict a watery Snow White rather than a goddess. El Caleuche, sailing over or under the seas with the souls of mariners and fishermen, is cartoonish in books or tourist guides.

Witchcraft and its demonic figures, instead, have undergone less of this Disney transformation. Beyond the discussion of whether or not they should be symbolized, graphic figures of mythological Chiloé deities, crude and often tasteless, flood the island shops. They are commonly on display in shop windows and one cannot but feel sorry for them. This is, of course, unfortunate, for myths in Mapuche-Veliche<sup>7</sup> culture were communicated orally, scorning any drawings and sculptures. If compared to the culture of the Taliban, in Afghanistan, it is understandable – though by no means justifiable – that photographs and figures with symbolical features should have been destroyed.

Yet the enemies these deities were forced to confront were not other mythological creatures, but much more implacable and unpredictable adversaries: those of the digital age. Cell phones took the place of flying creatures. It is so much easier to dial a number to communicate with someone than to swallow down nauseating food and vomit up one’s intestines to be able to fly off and carry messages. By simply dialing a few numbers a person’s voice can reach the most distant islands in a question of seconds. La Voladora sits with her arms folded, suddenly – and unexpectedly – idle. The advent of the salmon fisheries and the subsequent increase in labor means Chiloé residents no longer need to emigrate to the Argentine Patagonia in search of work, for they can stay on the island with their families. Farewell to the Thrauco, no longer able to rape young maidens in the woods and carry the blame for any children born out of wedlock. What is even worse for him, however, is having to put up for life with his mate, La Fiura, that repulsive creature, clad always in red, with insatiable sexual appetites that will wear out any man becoming involved with her.

In comparison with satellite television, and its colossal supply of erotic signals, the Siren pales on her island, trying to seduce mariners when she emerges from the waters. Fantasies have been defeated by virtual reality on a television screen or in a chat

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<sup>7</sup> Name given by the Spaniards to the Huilliche culture

room. The Siren no longer attracts men. Which, to the still incredulous, is all the better, for young men who became involved with her had children with fishtails.

But despite this cultural impact, one should wonder whether myths have entirely disappeared in Chiloé, or whether they are still part of the beliefs of a good many inhabitants. It is, no doubt, a question that is hard to answer. In the first place, a difference should be drawn with those living in the cities, who have more contact with anything extraneous and the age of digitalization, and for whom myths are definitely a thing of the past. The position of a peasant or fisherman on one of the remoter islands, however, would no doubt be different, despite cell phones and television, for their environment has been so much less contaminated by post-modernity. They may not believe in those deities so absurdly depicted in leaflets and shop windows, which are fed to tourists. Yet their cultural roots, their beliefs, will not allow them to cast them off entirely. It is not the way they are represented that counts, but what Renato Cárdenas once again defines so well:

*Myths and legends are not justifications or scientific explanations, or examples for moralization. Instead, a myth is the story it tells; and that account is neither a fable nor the symbolization of reality. A myth is primordial reality; it is creation. Which is why we say la **Pincoya** does not symbolize the fertility of seas and beaches; she IS fertility in that marine habitat.*

Perhaps to be able to achieve some minimal insight into this belief system, one would have to come into contact with, to relate to, a segment of the Chiloé population not precisely eager to talk about these topics, let alone confess their faith. This would involve profound knowledge of their history, their language, their traditions, and, above all, authentic respect for their convictions. Unfortunately, there are few people with the time or inclination to tour these regions and delve into the mystery. But despite it all, it continues to exist, and, like the Spaniards and the Jesuits before it, post modernity – skin-deep and almost vulgar – has been unable to crush a world where the irrational, the terrestrial, the mythical and even the poetic still endure.

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## LA GRANDE DAME

Chonchi is a lovely village, arguably one of the most beautiful in Chiloé. This natural harbor, no more than fifteen miles south of Castro, boasts of a small three-tier population and a larch-tiled church, which had its spire blown off in particularly fierce storm. Fortunately, it has been restored. It exudes history, fortunes no longer existent, old inveterately nostalgic wooden homes, the smell of sea and mussels. The two-block long embankment was reduced to half its size after a fire destroyed a good many of the houses. But on the section that survived the flames, the houses take on an arbitrary array of colors that provide it with a unique personality of its own. This embankment, now only a block in length, provides shelter to young backpackers from all over the world, and one simply can't help wondering what it is that brings them to Chonchi. It might be its beauty, or perhaps simply the fact that it is on the way to Cucao. I spent two summers in Chonchi, attracted not only by the stirring landscape and history of the town, but also by its people.

In the midst of those delightful hundred yards salvaged from the fire nestles a tiny first-floor restaurant known as *El Trébol*, which looks out onto the sea and the island of Lemuy, a typically Chilean restaurant: unprepossessing, with pictures of the sea and colored table-cloths. Anyone coming to the place for the first time would be well advised to resort to the ancient Greek custom of listening in on conversations in the agora and then foretelling future events. Not so much to be able to foretell as to be able to gain greater insight into some of the social structures in Chile. In contrast to other South American countries, social classes in Chile have remained practically static over the last several decades. The ancestral Basque aristocracy – like the Errázuriz or the Larrain families – continue to enjoy the same prestige and power they did during the times of *progreso* and their descendants still flaunt the same fair hair, the same blue eyes as in the Basque Provinces. That midday at *El Trébol*, one table in particular seemed to reflect those stringent social strata.

“Ja, just wait for it to cool, ja”.

The words came from a voluminous governess Teutonic in appearance who meticulously sought to teach table manners to three equally blonde children who doubtless bore a Basque surname.

“You wipe your hands on your napkin, not on your trousers,” she said tersely.

Rather than a post-modernistic governess she actually reminded me more of an Edwardian nanny, in a brocade-panelled dining-hall stuffed with objects, as though *horror vacui* had seized the owners and compelled them not to leave even the tiniest nook empty. Her list of instructions was never-ending, from how to hold their fork to learning that the “green stuff” smattering the fish was parsley. Her appetite was ferocious, which in no way deterred her from imparting a rapid fire of knowledge and protocol.

Restaurants in Chiloé tend to surprise you, either because of the diners or the decor. By mistake, I made my way into the ladies' room which was entirely done in

shocking pink and, to judge by the layout of the fittings, must also double as a parlor, for it had two toilets one alongside the other.

Close to the only pier in Chonchi, used round the clock by the salmon fisheries for unloading trucks, a graveled road climbs a path so steep that cars are scarcely able to negotiate it. I would only recommend the walk on foot to the young. Yet of course, the unexpected emerges... for this seaside village is the last place in Chiloé where one would expect to come across a large, two-storey house, typically European in style. In fact, the island dwellings – those belonging to Chiloé families – are perfect examples of modesty. No imposing facade, no grandiose porch. The new salmon industry fortunes on the island have taken it on themselves to erect ostentatious residences overlooking the sea, but their architecture is too foreseeable, too markedly obvious. What spread out before me was another type of dwelling, not only because of its lines, but because of the nostalgia the place conveyed. Whoever had built it had not spared money in their choice of timber, in the multiple roofs and turrets. The garden fell abruptly away towards the sea and from that height there was a clear view of the fjord and the island of Lemuy.

I decided to go in, led on by a sign in italic lettering that read *El Antiguo Chalet*. In Latin America the *chalet* was imported from France – along with pictures, porcelains and brocades – and even nowadays it is used to refer to an imposing house. A more rigorous eye would have singled out some imperfections, but the overall impression was fascinating. The ancient feudal-style home conveyed a peculiar grandeur, as though intent on rescuing a past long since lost. At the main door, against an *art nouveau* design and framed by the stairway downs into the garden, an elderly lady welcomed me, looking more like a character from a Tennessee Williams play than a Chiloé hostess. Her name was Teresa Vera Álvarez - or *Teruca*, as she was known to her friends - with whom I eventually struck up a close friendship over the following two summers. And it was not long before we were sitting in a sort of winter garden and she was regaling me with the events of her life over liqueur d'or and Chonchi rolls she herself had baked.

Teresa Vera was a woman who could not live or do without the story, the general experience of life. There are people who, in some way, simply close the book of life, turning their back on things that have happened to them as though they had lost significance over the years and actually prefer not to talk about them. But this woman with clearly European features - a rarity among Chiloé descendants - was engaged or, to a certain extent, ensnared by the memories of her life, and by the imposing background of that house. Why such a *chateau* in the midst of a tiny township south of Castro? It seemed incomprehensible, incoherent even, particularly bearing in mind it had been built in 1935, when Chonchi was only a tiny harbor. An English traveler might have defined this village as *a mere hamlet lost in the middle of nowhere*. But, of course, there was an explanation.

Eulogio Vera Cárcamo, Teresa's father, became an extremely wealthy timber and shipping impresario, possibly acquiring his knowledge from Ciríaco Álvarez, a millionaire whose fortunes will be considered later in this chapter. Why don Eulogio would have decided to build this palace - at least by Chiloé standards - not even his own daughter can be sure of. To her, this residence which was a replica of one found at the time in Puerto Montt, had always been a part of her past, and she devoted her life to defending it and avoiding it being sold off. A dwelling of this size in the middle of the 1930's must have left Chonchi inhabitants open-mouthed. Imagine the army of carpenters and craftsmen, glaziers and builders, gardeners and electricians setting to work to erect a memorable mansion; just picture the ships belonging to Vera Cárcamo, sailing into port loaded down with the most exotic of timber, like Guaiteca cypress, maniu, larch and evergreen beech, among others. Not that Chonchi had no imposing

homes, for the opposite is, in fact, true: even today they can be admired in their settings on incredibly steep slopes, yet their significance dwindles beside *El Antiguo Chalet*. Furthermore, it was the first house in Chonchi to have toilets, as we know them today, for homes in Chonchi all had toilets out the back.

Yet the name of the old house was not the one it had originally been given, but the one Teresa gave it several decades later when she turned it into a hotel. For her life was a series of ups and down, a string of desperate situations, which she described to me during my time there. That morning, while I savored the liqueur d'or in that home kept strictly *en aspic*, for all the furniture and ornaments - even an old record-player - are kept exactly where they have always been, Teresa started to recall some of the events in her life, perhaps led on by the fact that a writer had unexpectedly rung the bell, in search of characters, palazzos and motivations.

"When I was a girl I was sent off to a school of French nuns in Santiago," she remembered, "which was where I was educated. I was a boarder and only used to come to Chonchi on vacation."

It was the education expected at the time, where Chilean women rarely - if ever - stepped inside a university, and there were no college studies, and of course, working was out of the question for them. Teresa had been educated - like so many other society ladies - to do household tasks, speak French, set an impeccable table, and entertain guests. But that world was doomed to come to an end.

"My first disagreement with my father," she confessed, "was when I decided to get married. He didn't like my suitor, a young man from Chonchi. But I got married anyway; I left this enormous home and went to live somewhere much smaller close to the harbor."

Her father may, however, have been right in opposing the marriage for, after nine extremely unhappy years, she decided to make a break and set off with her only son to the old family home, which had suffered a few changes. Eulogio Vera Cárcamo had died and Teresa found herself involved in a whirlwind of inheritance formalities and mix-ups, a brother who had embezzled the entire fortune and, above all, having to come to terms with the world without her father's boundless cornucopia. She had been brought up to be an efficient housewife, a flawless hostess, able to keep up conversations in French, to bring up and educate children, but not to earn money, or hold down a job.

"I suddenly found myself entirely alone, divorced, with a son, an extremely hard financial situation, for my brother had become involved in some very bad business and in three months went through the whole of my father's fortune".

There were a few leftovers of that abundance of yore, some of which she inherited, though she could do little with it. What could Teresa Vera do with two tugboats? Whatever could she do with these absurd vessels? The foreseeable result was that she sold them for much less than they were worth. What could she do with a sawmill close to the Paildad fjord? She had never seen one, let alone learnt how to exploit one. The sawmill languished for several years until the land was eventually taken over and lost any value it might have had.

"I managed to get a job at the Registry Office in Chonchi," she admitted. "I didn't earn much, but at least it kept me busy".

But she must have felt Chonchi was a thorn in her side: the pain of a glory now long gone, the pain of a frustrated marriage. She managed to get a transfer to the Registry Office in Santiago and set off for the city with her son to inaugurate a new stage. But Teresa had not been born for the life of a public servant, or for a gray existence in an office with little to offer, immersed in tediously mediocre bureaucracy.

For, during those years the thought of the magnificent house was always at the back of her mind, the home built by her father and which, though still in the family, was to all effects abandoned.

"I was so lucky to have had this schoolmate at the nun's school in Santiago, whose husband, a well-known economist, decided to help and guide me. I'm really in his debt, because if I've been able to come this far, it was to a large extent thanks to him", she admits.

It is, in actual fact, thanks to her own efforts. Perhaps it was during those dark times, when she was working in a government office in Santiago, that the spirit of survival sprouted and thrived within her. The magnificent manor, despite the 1960 earthquake that sank half the garden, was not simply part of her life, it was *the whole* of her very existence. She felt life could only have meaning if she lived there, if she managed to return it to its splendor of old, if every morning she awoke to the sharp cawing of the ibises, if she was surrounded by all the furniture and ornaments that had belonged to her parents, if she could provide her son Pancho and her grandson, Francisco, with the grandeur not only of a dwelling, but with the splendor of Chiloé itself, with its blue seas and green hills, just across from the island of Lemuy. It was around this time her friend's husband suggested she should buy it off her siblings. What at first sight sounded like craziness (where would she find the wherewithal to buy it?) eventually became an obsession. After complicated financial negotiations, Teresa Vera Álvarez became the sole proprietress of those thirteen hectares overlooking the fjord, which it would not be exaggerated to describe as the most beautiful in Chonchi. This success, this decision that was to change the rest of her life - and that of her son's - initially suffered a very serious setback.

The Marxist administration of Salvador Allende considered the rich should be deprived of their wealth to provide for the poor, though certainly not with the spirit, philosophy or feats of the legendary Robin Hood. This was the beginning of the expropriation era when companies ruinously ended up in the hands of the state and premises and homes were illegally taken over by the needy populace. The house, which had finally been signed into Teresa's hands, was occupied by one of her employees, an Indian from Quellón, who shut the door in its owner's face. After years of financial deprivation, of having to live in the city, of uncertainty, of sleepless nights and now that at long last this emblematic dwelling had been signed over to her, to some extent returning her identity, it was almost ironic that she should not even be allowed to go into the place.

"It was a desperate situation," Teresa recalled. "For three years, I wasn't allowed into my own home, where I had lived so many years of my life... the home of my memories. Simply thinking about that Indian woman using my belongings turned my stomach. But I never gave up".

Which, of course, went without saying, for Teresa is essentially a survivor able to confront any situation. If she were lost in the African forest, and surrounded by cannibal tribes, and a rescue patrol were to discover her, they would probably find her giving instructions - obviously in French - to the chief, who would have had to change not only the domestic organization of the hamlet but even their cooking habits. After all, there is no reason why a cannibal should turn his nose up at a *coq au vin*, cooked, after all, with the bird's blood.

No sooner did the winds of political change begin to blow in Chile, in other words, when the government of Salvador Allende crumbled, Teresa did not waste a minute. After lengthy legal battles she had started prior to the coup, she eventually entered her old home, accompanied by *Carabineros*, and dislodged the intruder. What

she had never imagined, however, was the horror she would find when she got finally got in.

“Imagine going into the home that formed part of my childhood memories, my affections, my background, to find that it looked as though animals had been living there not human beings”, she said, with unconcealable disgust. “They had pulled out the electrical wiring - to sell it, I suppose. Not a single pane of glass was whole: they had all been savagely broken. And they’d cut down all the trees in the garden I used to play in as a child, simply to use them as firewood for the kitchen range and the fireplace. They had even urinated the floor, for they probably didn’t even know how to use a toilet.”

Humiliation, perplexity, wrath must have stirred up a whirlwind of feelings. No doubt she remembered the parties in the past, with don Eulogio Vera Cárcamo’s dining room full of guests, and the whole house lit up, the sound of the piano echoing in the salon, while myrtle liqueur was served by the fireplace. Perhaps it should be noted here that, for the older generation the left wing and right wing continue to exist, even though as a political system they no longer make sense in the world of post-modernity. Intellectualism normally leans to the left, which supported the *Unión Popular* that took Salvador Allende to power. Teresa Vera Álvarez is decidedly right wing. Not only because of her education and beliefs. If she ever had any doubts - her only sister overtly supported the left - after having seen her home soiled and uncared for, the mere mention of the *Unión Popular* stirs up her fury. Imagine her walking from room to room in that devastated house, walls broken and crumbling, pieces of glass all over the floor, the smell of urine pervading the entire dwelling... the most complete neglect. What could she do, then, with this tumbledown old mansion?

As was to be expected, shed found the solution.

“I decided to make it over into a hotel and restaurant”, she recalled.

Which did not come as a surprise, for life had taught her not only to survive, but to take fast decisions and not drown in a glass of water. What a wonderful challenge to take the house of her ancestors and turn it into a hotel where she would be able to apply everything she had learnt. It was a very particular time in the economy of Chiloé, with the salmon fisheries slowly taking over every cove and fjord. This meant company executives, foreigners, tourists, and then those who would spend the night at *El Antiguo Chalet*, delighting in Teresa’s exquisite food, before boarding the six a.m. shuttle to El Chaitén, on the Chilean mainland. And that is just what happened for several years. The most delicious seafood and fish, *pisco sours* prepared with almost chemical precision, comfortable rooms and bathrooms, and Teresa’s warmth and charm behind every detail. But this gentle dove could turn into a raging lion if circumstances required.

“One evening a group of men and women came in for dinner; they drank everything available and then asked for fish and seafood”, she told me. When the check was brought they refused to pay it saying the seafood was off. I approached the table and explained that I served only quality products, that nothing of the like had ever happened in this dining room, but that to avoid disagreeable scenes I agreed to charge them only for the drinks they had consumed. When they rudely refused to do so, using the most vulgar language, I stood there and told them “You get out of here right now or I’ll call the *Carabineros*”. They disappeared as if by magic.

As time went by *El Antiguo Chalet* languished. The dining room stopped serving meals, either because the salmon fishery executives had changed their habits, or because the shuttle to El Chaitén no longer left from Chonchi and started departing from Quellón instead. Whatever the reason, the fact is Teresa, too, was fatigued by so much work. She chose to keep up the hotel with a low profile, accepting occasional guests, and only serving breakfast for them. Yet the old Vera home is still curiously the

epicenter of Chonchi. During the two summers I rented a comfortable cabin close to the house I was able to meet the small circle of Chonchi fauna that usually visit her, as though it were their royal duty. Notwithstanding their ideologies, the tragedies and sufferings undergone by the Chilean left under the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet, Teresa wields a powerful presence in Chonchi where, you may be sure, she is still the queen. Through her I met several of the inhabitants of that dazzlingly beautiful little town.

On the single block along the breakwater front, which saved her from the fire, stands a small, white, two-storey wooden house with red windows, a refuge for desperate souls on the island, who, I mention in passing, are on the increase. It is not a church, but a very successful psychoanalysis bureau presided over by Doctor Eliana Corona Romo and, from the décor looks more like a Viennese consulting room dating back to the first decades of the twentieth century than a modest therapeutic location. Indeed, Eliana, seated among portraits of Sigmund Freud and European carpets, has opened her arms and her psychiatric insight to attend to peasants and plant managers alike, all of whom are hard put to adapting to the difficult conditions and changes time has wrought in Chiloé.

“This island is no longer what it was before the salmon fisheries settled here”, is her verdict.

Her voice is deep and her speech imperious. When describing concepts and experiences she often half-closes her eyes, pausing for effect. Her abundant gray hair and somewhat imposing figure work like a magnet on visitors.

“It’s been more than ten years since the economy changed in Chiloé. Now we have an astoundingly high suicide rate, alcoholism is on the increase, as is the destruction of peasant families. Not to forget the climate, of course.”

Their insular, bucolic nature, the economy Chiloé families employ to subsist, bartering, respect for the older generation, in short, everything contributing to a primitive culture in comparison with the mainland, has been blown to pieces by the salmon fisheries. These companies, for the most part foreign-owned, have occupied every available cove and lake in Chiloé to devote it to breeding salmon to export to Europe and Japan, clearly competing with Norway. This has dramatically transformed economy and family relationships on the island. Until that time the young people lived with their parents out in the country, producing whatever was necessary to survive. But over the last ten years they have started working at the salmon fisheries, and collecting cash at the end of each month, something heretofore unimaginable on the island. No longer living with their elders, they have made their way to Castro or Quellón; discotheques, gangs, drugs, early pregnancies are on the rise, and any of them might spend a whole month’s pay on a pair of Nike shoes.

“The old peasants have been left wretchedly alone”, says Eliana. “Families have become dismembered, with the ensuing psychiatric problems.”

There are those who declare the weather is the main cause of suicides. Just imagine the endless period from April to November, eight months of continual rain, of bone-piercing damp, of muddy roads, of lack of production. In earlier days, the family group provided support. Today, without their youngsters, without the arms required to work the land, melancholy and depression have taken hold of the Chiloé rural class. Nor is island mythology, so rich in deities able to palliate their troubles. To make matters worse, salmon fisheries work twenty-four hours a day, which involves night shifts. Not a few employees have fallen overboard and drowned, their bodies to be rescued later by divers. The people of Chiloé, overwhelmed by the weather and the lack of a family, haven taken refuge in alcohol or in hanging themselves from a tree. Surprisingly, it is



the Chilean leftwing from the time of Marxist President Salvador Allende who try to help the people of Chiloé, whether psychiatrists, like Eliana Corona Romo, or former priests.

“Actually, salmon are predators”, she told me. “They feed off the seafood which are the wealth of the island and create problems for a lot of fishermen”.

And then, there are the plant managers. Pay, of course, is first-rate. But the stress is so enormous that the divorce rate is soaring. They can be seen riding around at top speed in their 4-wheel drives, talking on their mobile phones, managing operations worth millions, reporting to international directors, competing with dozens of other salmon fisheries, putting up with the dreadful weather, homesick for Santiago or any other city on the mainland. These, too, come to Eliana as patients, and she is required to branch out culturally to take in from the primitive to the sophisticate.

Eliana Corona Romo voluntarily chose to live on Chiloé, specifically in Chonchi. She and her husband normally spend the weekends out in the country on a one hundred-hectare property close to the city. And, though not assiduous guests at *El Antiguo Chalet*, they never miss the large Christmas dinners, or the odd birthday celebration held there.

So her memory will not fail her, Teresa unfailingly keeps a guest book where any visitors or travelers who stay there are asked to provide their impressions, frequently formal and considerate. One afternoon in the winter garden looking out onto the Lemuy fjord, where the sacred guest-book is kept, the proprietress opened the book and started leafing through its pages and making a roll-call of all those who had been to the house. To her, the personal impressions recorded there have an almost biblical value, and she shows them off with undeniable pride.

“Look at what the Home Minister of France wrote”, she says, while starting to read in perfect French praises only a diplomat can contrive. That visit had remained etched forever in his memory. Likewise, that of a legendary neighbor, if this is to mean someone in Quellón, to the south of the island, which in places this far would be viewed as ‘neighboring’. This was French count Timoléon de la Taille-Trétinville, at the time the owner of four hundred thousand hectares in the Pirulil cordillera bordering on the land of the Sahr Christies.

“He was a picturesque man”, she recalls. “One night he came to see me and locked his car with the keys inside. In his impeccable French he asked whether I could lend him a wrench; then, with the tool in his hand, he walked out to the car and without hesitation smashed one of the windows to get the keys out. A short while later he left, but was back again in less than half an hour. I was afraid he had had an accident, or might not be feeling well. But no, he had my wrench in his hand. *Ma chère Thérèse*, he apologized, “I have taken this tool my mistake. *Voilà*. I watched, open-mouthed as he went on his way once again. *Ça fait chateau, non?*”

Chiloé customs can break with all the worldly rules in existence, whether in Santiago, or anywhere on the planet. The everyday meeting place for residents and guests is normally neither the sitting room nor the dining room, but rather the kitchen. Teresa’s kitchen is particularly large and modernized, but the stove, where the food is cooked, is a kitchen range made of iron and kept alight with the firewood so plentiful in Chiloé. People’s days are spent around this imaginary campfire. They have breakfast, lunch, tea - *onces*, as it is known in Chile- and dinner in this place. The dampness on the island is so penetrating that very often clothes are hung around the fire. The domestic help shares the table and the meals with the owners and guests, as though they were part of the family. Something an elegant lady in Santiago would find horrifying lacks any kind of foundation in Chiloé. Imagine a spotless dining room in the Chilean capital -

probably with French or English furniture - with the always present long table, coasters, silverware and flatware, and a white-gloved butler or a maid in cap and apron serving the table. What is least expected is a scene of spontaneity, and any conversation does not normally stray from the most conventional worldly guidelines.

Surprisingly enough, in Teresa Vera's kitchen conversations followed a very particular form. Suffice it to say that on many evenings it would be the inevitable habitués of *El Antigua Chalet* who would sit around the table covered by a simple tablecloth: a former Spanish priest, a writer, a psychiatrist, a maid, a teenage student and, of course, Teresa, who had the incorrigible habit of orchestrating everything and not keeping still for a moment. And, in contrast to Santiago, there were no silver platters with French food, but instead somebody would stretch out a hand and the most delicious of seafood would appear on their plate.

The natives of Chiloé, despite globalization and social changes brought about by the salmon industry, have been unable to escape so far from the subsistence economy which involves eating and enjoying the natural resources on the island. The menu, therefore, is suitable for the four seasons. No one would even think of buying artichokes or tomatoes (these latter are cultivated in greenhouses) or any other vegetables in the supermarket, for they grow them in their gardens, along with apples and strawberries; or of buying bread, which is baked daily in the kitchen range. Milk cartons have never found their way into Teresa's home, for she has her own cows, which can, on occasion, do the unexpected. The frequent incursions of one of the dairy cows around my cabin - she would come and rest her muzzle on my window - eventually forced me to tell Teresa about it. No sooner had I finished telling her what was going on than she ran in search of Feli, one of her employees.

"Feli! Feli!" she exclaimed. "Take the cow out to the bull - see if she calms down!"

So off Feli went towards the undulating prairies overlooking the sea. I never learnt whether the cow had calmed down, but I presume so, for I never saw her again. It would be a mistake, however, to believe that Teresa is a sort of bulldozer capable of confronting any kind of problems. Throughout those two summers, I came to understand her vulnerability, her fears of a past she is unable to forget, financial problems and, above all, of what is going to happen to her son and her grandson when she is no longer there for them. What will happen to *El Antigua Chalet*, which she is the life and soul of? On my last stay she had been devastated by the death of her only sister who lived in Santiago, a fact which probably brought her abruptly face to face with the finitude of life. She feared the cotton wool she had wrapped her son and teenaged grandson in - for reasons beyond the scope of this travel book - might lead to negative consequences if she were no longer with them. And she would spend one sleepless night after another, anguished by a sea of conflicts and threats, wondering where she would get the strength from to carry on. But, fortunately, she has them. Problems have to be solved on a day-to-day basis, and there is not a moment of rest. The complex management of her finances, which sometimes requires a fair amount of juggling, though she always manages to keep them going; the maintenance of the enormous house, where there is always something to repair; the education of Francisco, her grandson; the endless menus she has to monitor to ensure the table is always crowded with diners.

"There are days I feel I simply won't make it," she used to tell me. "I simply lie in bed, paralyzed."

But these moments are, happily, fleeting. Teresa is a purebred Chiloé inhabitant who knows adversity and hindrances are simply part of their culture.

The prairies belonging to Teresa Vera around *El Antiguo Chalet* are perhaps the most beautiful in Chonchi: iridescently green and undulating, they slope gently towards the sea and by the bay stands the tiny church of Vilupulli, one of the few Charles Darwin visited on his horse-ride to Cucao. And up close, when seen in all its splendor, one cannot but wonder at this unbelievable architectural work of art entirely made of wood, with its four-column portico looking out towards the Corcovado volcano. But the amazing one hundred and forty larch-tiled churches in Chiloé mean something more than an architectural style with strong Bavarian influences. They were actually the response to a cultural and religious model, and their towering steeples not only sought to reach up to Heaven, but were also reference points for fishermen and sailors, who were always threatened by the dangerous currents and tides.

By Chiloé standards Vilupulli is a minor church. It lacks the splendor of its Achao counterpart, with its dazzling naves and altar, which are included in any photograph book about Chiloé; neither does it summon hundreds of faithful, like the renowned patron feast of the Nazarene of Caguach, in August and January. Yet, on the other hand, it was the only one Charles Darwin visited. Mass is only heard on Sundays, and its portico looks out onto the south, towards the Corcovado volcano, as though sheltering from rains and winds. But that afternoon in December the tiny church opened its doors so mass could be read for the faithful, that is, those peasants around Vilupulli who still preserve a genuine sense of religion and tradition, and the legacy left by the Jesuit teachings.

At ten to four in the afternoon the church bell rang and the peasants began to arrive, dressed up in their Sunday best. The priest, instead, had nothing in common with the clerics of past centuries, who arrived on vessels with suitable sacred images and were made welcome by the *fiscales*. In this post-modernistic age, the priest arrives in his car wearing jeans and a windjammer, though he celebrates mass wearing the rigorously required clerical garments for the time of the liturgical year, which that December day, were white. But his presence and his discourse during mass have the same strength, the same charisma as in the past.

That December 28<sup>th</sup> was the celebration of the Innocent Saints, and the topic was communication within the family. I was surprised at his lucidity and modern approach, alerting them to the dangers of having family meals with the television on, leading to isolation and lack of dialogue between parents and children. Surprising, too, was the absorbed concentration of the congregation, descendants of the Huilliche Indians, who clearly understood the message they were being given. As will be noted later, the church in Chile and, in particular in Chiloé, carried out an excellent mission and achieved substantially better results than in other Latin American countries.

This architectural jewel - I still keep a photo of it on my desk, which will most likely remain there for the rest of my days - was my first contact with a type of religious aesthetics which is, perhaps, unique in the world. Taken out of context, in another type of scenario, the tiny church of Vilupulli (from *vilu*, grass snake, and *pulli*, hill) might lack its unusual grandeur and would no longer be a delight to the eyes. Located on a small promontory, it dominates the wonderful Chonchi landscape. It might be interesting to reproduce the impressions of Charles Darwin when he passed by there in 1835.

*We proceeded to the south –generally following the coast, and passing through several hamlets, each with its large barn-like chapel built of wood. At Vilipulli, Don Pedro asked the commandant to give us a guide to Cucao. The old gentlemen offered to come himself; but for a long time nothing would persuade him, that two Englishmen really wished to go such an out of the way place as Cucao. We were thus accompanied by the two greatest aristocrats in the country, as was plainly to be seen in the manner of all the poorer Indians towards them. At Chonchi we struck across the island, following intricate winding paths, sometimes passing through magnificent forests. This undulating woody country, partially cultivated, reminded me of the wilder parts of England.*

No sooner is Chonchi left behind on the way south, along Road 5, than the traveler can be deluded into believing he is somewhere in Europe, perhaps more like Switzerland or Germany than the wildest parts of England. The landscape becomes an inevitable postcard and, arguably, the most dazzling scenery in Chiloé, with its iridescent hills, tilted roofs, Jersey cows, the Pirulil cordillera and the placid sea of the archipelago, crowned by the volcanoes. Coming upon Lake Tarahuin is not simply a metaphor, but rather the consequence of a surprisingly winding road giving the traveler the impression of riding a roller-coaster. And there, suddenly, the lake materializes to one side of the road. Its waters are dark, like most of the lakes in Chiloé: the trees secrete substances that darken the water, making them more dramatic. Yet, salmon and trout fishing in this lake is superlative. It is noticeably different from other Chilean or Argentinean lakes, where fishermen have to wait for hours on end for the fish to bite. And, of course, fishermen are expected to fish from a boat with the unavoidable fishing guide, a character who is usually a polyglot used to an international audience, and deploying state of the art sports equipment and baits. None of this happens, however, on Lake Tarahuin.

Boats are rented out by Dioni, a Huilliche Indian woman, whose age is difficult to guess, who streaks across the waters using an engine or oars, according to the circumstances, and who is surprisingly knowledgeable as to where exactly the fish are biting.

“The trout are over there”, she signals, arm outstretched, “beside the salmon fishery”.

The bucolic peacefulness of this landscape too has been disturbed by the industry that has left no corner of Chiloé without exploiting. In fact, in the middle of the lake there is a floating platform with numerous salmon breeding cages, where launches always stand ready to transport staff to the southern bank. The problem is not simply visual. Lack of efficiency in the salmon industry, as well as an entire disregard for their environmental responsibility is evidenced by a variety of facts. For instance, there are no waste treatment systems. Waste is simply thrown out and left for nature to deal with. The phosphorous and nitrogen used in the salmon industry are responsible for the slow, progressive death of Lake Tarahuin, as well as other bodies of water like the Llanquihue, Puyehue or Rupanco, to mention only the most important. And many of these lakes have contamination levels fifteen to twenty times above the acceptable limit. But Dioni is unaware of these threats. Her sole concern is to cater to as many fishermen as possible in those fleeting “fifteen minutes” of activity the year provides. It is, actually, the two summer months, January and February, which bring fishermen to Lake Tarahuin. After that silence, steady rains, stinging cold. Yet that January afternoon everyone seemed to be living to the full their fifteen minutes of life: there wasn't a single cloud in the sky or a ripple across the surface of the water. According to the

Indian woman, these were not good fishing conditions. Cloudy, windless days, instead, would ensure trout of considerable size. That afternoon the outboard motor came to a standstill, severely affecting the trolling. Without hesitation Dioni took up her oars and started rowing with such enthusiasm and fruition it felt as though we were making as good a speed as with a motor.

A giant black and orange horsefly buzzed around us.

"It always turns up at that time," said Dioni.

I remembered an unforgettable passage from *Ninety-two days*, the great travel book by Evelyn Waugh, which it is worth reproducing in homage to a master. When in the heart of the forest they heard the buzzing of an insect, Mr. Bain said to the writer:

*There was some insect which buzzed in a particular manner. 'Listen,' said Mr. Bain one day, 'that is most interesting. It is what we call the "six o'clock beetle", because he always makes that noise at exactly six o'clock.'*

*'But it is now quarter past four.'*

*Yes, that is what is so interesting.'*

She rowed towards the southern bank without going too far from the salmon fishery. I noticed a house, with its own jetty, possibly erected by some prosperous entrepreneur from Santiago: I mentioned its beauty, the stunning place where it had been located, and its almost idyllic features.

"Waste of money! You can't get there by land," she told me. "Sheer waste of money."

"But there might be a path among the hills," I objected. "Besides, there's another house close by, they should be able to reach it by car."

"Sheer waste of money," she insisted.

Then, as though revealing an ancestrally kept secret, she told me the owner of the house they could get to by car would not let them through. A simple Chiloé peasant had managed to stand up to a powerful impresario, like the farmer who refused to sell Frederick the Great of Prussia his land next to the Sans Souci palace, by simply having the law enforced.

While she changed the bait every now and again in the hope of getting something to bite, Dioni kept silent, as though doubtful of my sporting capacity. Eventually she pointed with her index finger towards a silver decoy at the bottom of the fishing box.

"Why don't you use that one," she suggested.

In a matter of minutes I had a trout on the hook, which she deftly gathered up with the net.

At sundown, we made our way back. The last part of the lake, where it narrows and finally dies alongside road 5, is a sanctuary for particularly noisy birds - dozens of them flying threateningly around the boat, as if they knew that a trout will jump out at any minute. And, inevitably, with so many gulls and albatross around, my mind went back to that memorable account of a character in *En Patagonia*, by Bruce Chatwin, who remembers a group of shipwrecked sailors desperately trying to keep afloat in southern waters, while petrels and cormorants ferociously attempted to gouge their eyes out.

"Throw the decoy in here," she said.

The suggestion sounded reckless. The birds were dangerously close and I could clearly see their beaks as their screeching became ever more stentorian. However I valiantly threw in the decoy - Dioni was not mistaken. Only a little while later I had

caught another trout. The struggle not only involved bringing the fish in gently but also keeping those devilish birds at bay, for they, too, wanted to carry off the trophy. And, like the sailors in Chatwin's book, we got away with our lives - and with our eyes.

Some situations in Chiloé are still intriguing and even contradictory. Take, for instance, a typical dinner where Teresa Vera had invited friends to *El Antiguo Chalet* and prepared the island's typical dish of *curanto*, a veritable bomb for anybody's liver with the most varied and visually striking varieties of seafood, native potatoes, *milcao* and Chiloé chorizos, which are not easy for a foreigner to digest. Anyone who has been in Argentina will know the same can be said of the famous *asados* where all the viscera, from the cow's udder to the animal's guts, are roasted over red-hot coals. For the *Chilote* people, or anyone born in these latitudes, it is simply another meal, like any other, one they have been used to eating ever since they were born. In Chiloé, however, the stomach has no ideology, and it was almost paradoxical that Teresa Vera Álvarez, the daughter of the Chonchi millionaire, the young girl educated at a French Nuns' school, should be sharing the table with all the Chilean leftwing. Perhaps for the younger yuppie generation who had not experienced the excesses of the leftwing or the atrocities of the rightwing, this is simply a distant episode in the history of their country, like when my generation was told of the Spanish Civil War. But ideological differences in Chonchi in no way interfered with friendships or affection. Actually, the topic is seldom brought up - which of course does not mean it is taboo.

But I digress. That night of *curanto*, there was among the diners a certain Hernán, a Chilean who had been living for some years in Venezuela where he had fled during the horrors of the military coup by General Augusto Pinochet, in 1973. He was born in Chonchi and while still a child moved with his parents to Santiago. Teresa used to see him often in the summer, when he came back to spend his holidays in the town where he was born. Even now, at the age of fifty, he still often recalled the times when all the rooms were lit up and the large dining room accommodated at least twenty guests. He had suffered a form of palsy that had affected one of his hands and a leg, which only made life harder for him. The first of these was only a few days after the military coup that overthrew the Salvador Allende administration.

"I was never again able to get into my house in Santiago", he recalls. "The military had taken it over and I had to go underground until I could make up my mind what to do. The family was dismembered and each of us had to take refuge in a different country."

Family members and friends, in those terrible days of the 1973 military coup, literally had to take the chance and see what fate had in store for them. Hernán and Isabel Parra, a member of the celebrated Chilean family of singers and composers, of whom the best known is Violeta, tossed a coin and, while it was still in the air they knew they would obey the sentence dictated by head or tail.

"Venezuela was my lot," Hernán confessed.

That night around Teresa Vera's table, Hernán told me he was able to seek asylum in Caracas where he spent the rest of his life, with the exception of a couple of years in Cuba. He had freed himself of the horrors of Chilean prisons, tortures and executions, of being included in the lists of the *missing*, of confinement. But his exile had left its mark: he would forever be a foreigner in his own country. He was visiting Chile with his Venezuelan wife and daughter that summer and, despite all the time gone by, he conveyed an unequivocal nostalgia simply at being once again in Chonchi. I met him a

few times touring the tiny town, struggling up the steep slope of *calle* Centenario, delighting in the Chonchi architecture with its liberal use of timber, slanted roofs and unexpected windows. These had been his roots and he might well have told a different story.

The military coup in 1973, the death of President Salvador Allende and the brutal events in the following years at the hands of General Augusto Pinochet and his administration will be difficult for any minimally civilized person to forget. Chile inaugurated the macabre doctrine of State Security - soon to be followed by Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay and Brazil - where anything was viewed as allowable, from executions (even for pregnant women in captivity who out of “mercy” were executed only after they had delivered the child), to torture and exile. In Argentina, any infants born at the detention centers were distributed to friends as though they were pets. But this is a travel book and most likely not the right place for a dissertation on those years where terror reigned. But Chiloé was not foreign to the situation, for they received a contingent of *relegados*, a political neologism. Fortunately, and most likely due to its insular location and cultural isolation, the people in Chiloé never had to undergo the experience of the inhabitants of Magallanes, where repression escalated to crazy levels. Suffice it to say that Dawson Island, on the Strait of Magellan, worked as one of the detention centers where torture and death were the order of the day.

Chiloé, instead, provided refuge to political prisoners who had withstood their experience in jail and become what was now known as *relegados*. They were relegated to Pisagua (to the north), to isolated southern areas as well as to Chiloé. Chonchi, Dalcahue and Quellón were the areas most frequented by these new pariahs. Cruelty was not restricted solely to confining them in remote hamlets where they knew nobody, but also involved the conditions in which they were sent. They arrived at their destination with no more than the clothes on their back (some of them without even a coat to keep them warm), to live and survive however they could.

Just imagine, for a moment, a *relegado* under arrest for an indefinite time, completely unaware of his final destination, suddenly finding himself in Dalcahue or Chonchi, penniless, jobless, and having to report regularly to the authorities. Gradually they were allowed to receive money from their families, and to make a few limited phone calls. But their initial situation was atrociously repressive. If the authorities heard they were having a good time they were relegated elsewhere. In Chonchi, some got help from the inhabitants and the Church who gave them food and accommodation.

Rosa Pérez Pinto comes from the purest Chonchi stock and owns a shoe store on *calle* Centenario, well located at the bottom of one of the steepest slopes I have seen on the island. Her store also carries a stock of delicious gold liqueur as well as a liqueur made from myrtle - that delectable Chiloé fruit - and which she herself makes. Nobody would have guessed that this woman, to all appearances peaceable and serene, would have become so completely involved when the first relegates came to Chonchi in 1973. Rosa has already crossed the seventy-year barrier, which has in no way diminished her activity, or the left-wing ideology she never sought to conceal, even during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.

“The relegates did not know Chiloé and thought it was a desert,” declared Rosa, seated at the table in her home next door to the shoe-shop. “And they were in for a wonderful surprise when they got such a welcome from the people here - obviously the leftwing sympathizers. They were extremely hard times, and each one of us who belonged to the left was carefully controlled.”

She was one of the first victims. She worked at the Agricultural and Cattle Farming Development Institute in Chonchi, and because of her ideas she was

immediately made redundant, based on the verdict of the Band of *Carabineros* who determined who the government could or could not trust.

"I said everything I had to say to them and then walked calmly home. I was never taken back on the job, nor did I ask for it. They were unable to touch my husband, who also has leftwing ideas, because he is a tradesman and not a civil servant."

No one ever knew how the relegates got to Chiloé, whether by bus or by truck. Once set down in Chonchi, the first thing these political pariahs did was look for a boarding house to stay. But which one? With what money? In the darkness of the winter nights, under the incessant rain with the cold humidity seeping into their bones, they would go to the church, an architectural jewel located in the middle of the city's three levels. Chilean priests, in contrast to other South American ecclesiastical peers who lived during the time of military dictatorships, were concerned about the relegates. Not only that: they also sought to help them. And, as happened with the French resistance during World War II, though on an immensely minor scale, leftwing supporters in Chonchi organized themselves to provide them with aid. A secret system was created to collect funds, for the new government wanted these stigmatized people to suffer, to go hungry, to do without the barest necessities. But this was not so in Chonchi. There was even one man in Chonchi who did not belong to any political party, yet he constantly provided these people with food, apparently without fearing retaliation.

Rosa Pérez Pinto was energetic in her efforts to help the *relegados*. For this was not simply a question of ideology but also of minimal humane living conditions. Some of the relegates were financially well off - and the people who provided them with help knew this - but others had nowhere to fall dead. Fund-raising campaigns, known as *Del Sol* were organized.

"After dark I'd go out stealthily to collect the money," Rosa recalled. "They'd give me five hundred or a thousand pesos, which at the time was a lot. We used to collect up to fifteen thousand pesos, because the relegates had to pay three thousand at the boarding house. I'd put the money in envelopes, seal them, and then my son would go out and deliver them. Unfortunately I couldn't invite them home: it wouldn't have been good for them or for me."

These political "prisoners" were normally there no longer than three months. They were returned to their own land and later relegated elsewhere. In time, and once the change in the Chilean government came about, they may have thanked God for having been in Chiloé, where they were helped and treated like human beings. During those years, the jails and detention centers, from Arica to Magallanes, were crowded with political prisoners, and not all of them managed to survive. Others went into exile, which is normally painful. But those who were relegated to Chonchi never forgot it. Norman Garín, who will be mentioned later, came to Castro after having been in jail, and after thirty years he is still living there. A Spanish teacher came to Chonchi, in one of those years Rosa defines as terrible, and had nowhere to go. Worst of all, he had left behind five children who were entirely indigent.

"We used to pay for his boarding house and collect money for him to send to his children", she told me.

The relegates not only had good memories, they were also very grateful. A short time ago the Spanish teacher turned up in Chonchi by surprise with his children, all of them college graduates. The encounter after all those years must have been moving. And no doubt they celebrated with a glass of myrtle liqueur prepared according to that ancestral top secret recipe Rosa Pérez Pinto keeps hidden away, and which she declares to be the only authentic one.



Getting to Catalina Cruz's house by car is little less than a feat given the lack of information abounding on the island, the precariousness of the roads and the sparse amount of houses; but it was inevitable that, on reaching Teupa, one should run into the tiny church with its unusual little cemetery. *Chilotes*, like the ancient Egyptians, have a very particular conception of death, or at least of the things that can accompany the dead. A simple tomb with only a sober headstone would be out of the question. The dead person needs to connect to everyday life and mourners are required to dress the vault with household objects. Vaults are therefore little houses built of larch tiles, with tiny barn-shaped roofs, colorfully painted predominantly blue, with a zinc roof crowned with crosses or stars. Inside the vault there is some furniture so the dead person will feel more at home. These are not mausoleums, like the ones found in some cemeteries in Genoa or Buenos Aires, ostentatious and intolerably *fin de siècle*. Instead they are rather like doll's houses. But there is a curious belief that the dead will require the same comforts as the living. In the Castro cemetery there is a little house with two beds and furniture and there is even said to be an electric toaster!

It is unusual to see this weird cult to the dead in Chiloé, in small holy fields close to the church. This variety of building styles is found only in Teupa and in very few other places. On the other hand, the little houses - despite their minute size - attempt to imitate real dwellings where the dead have spent their lifetime, and as if, in fact, they were still alive. To be able to rest in peace, the dead need a known habitat, recognizable objects and roofs to protect them from the rain, the wind and the cold.

When she built her house Catalina Cruz had chosen one of the remotest locations in Teupa, a place very hard to get to. But the view from there dominated the continental cordillera, the island of Lemuy and even the peninsula where Detif is located. The vast garden was a flawless sample of botanical good taste, both because of the selection of plants and their layout, which did not come as a surprise: Catalina belonged to an old aristocratic Chilean family. She had chosen to spend most of the year in Chiloé in almost absolute solitude, surrounded by a desolate landscape and with scarcely any human contact. Her sole contact with the outside world is her mobile phone. And this is only a recent acquisition.

"Once, when I went on a cruise to the southern fjords and glaciers, I made up my mind I would spend the rest of my life here", she confessed. "The first glimpse of the coast of Chiloé - of Teupa, actually - was enough. And I simply knew I would end my days here."

Catalina's features are still those of a woman once dazzlingly beautiful and sophisticated. Her intensely blue eyes are not only observant but penetrating. Solitude has hardened her, made her somewhat authoritarian, probably to be able to survive and have things done in such a hostile setting. Yet, she has somehow instrumented that solitude, perhaps overemphasizing visual effects, which is translated into her perfect wooden house, its decoration and the exquisite, obsessively cared for, plants and flowers. It is to a certain extent contradictory that this refined house should stand there flaunting its differences with typical Chiloé dwellings. Though the kitchen range is in some way part of the living room, it is not the place everyone gathers round - as happens on the rest of the island - it is, rather, a sophisticated continuation of it. And it is simply enough to take a look at this house and its lovely garden to discover that aesthetics are intrinsically a part of Catalina. And, though obsessive, it is a good remedy against solitude and the passage of time. Each piece of furniture, each picture, each fabric is just right - none other could have created that singular effect.

There isn't much to do in Teupa, except keeping house and caring for the garden. Nor does she have friends, with the exception of Teresa Vera in Chonchi, a mere ten kilometers away. As girls they had been schoolmates at the French nun school in Santiago, and now call on each other from time to time.

We strolled down to the sea, through a dense forest where myrtles abound until we eventually came upon a small private pebbly beach, which had become a sort of sanctuary. This was perhaps the point where she felt her best, and what she wished to show guests. It was inevitable I should wonder what a woman like Catalina was doing in Teupa. Because, as we continued to talk, I gradually discovered more of her most unusual and unconventional personality. It is perhaps the very loneliness of these latitudes that leads people, most particularly women, to a curious form of catharsis by unburdening certain aspects of their lives to outsiders. Catalina's life had not lacked variety: there were marriages, divorces, romances, children, and even a quiet and very fleeting stay in Argentina when the Chilean military took power - not because she was genuinely leftwing, but perhaps she had flirted with it, which is not the same. But now the years had gone by, simmering passions had cooled, and the wild excitement of living on the edge was gone. It was then that Chiloé became another great challenge to her, a place where age no longer mattered, and there was no need for additional stimulus. She bought the land and in a matter of months had built the house, a far from easy task, for it was built during the winter months while Catalina mounted guard daily overseeing the builders.

"When I decided to settle here", she recalls, "my friends thought I'd gone crazy. Isn't it strange how hard it is for some people to accept that you can live a different kind of life. And living in Chiloé and enjoying it doesn't necessarily mean you have to be a cavalry sergeant, as so many people think."

Nevertheless, it takes guts. Her children call her "doña Bárbara", alluding to the character in the novel by Rómulo Gallegos. To others she could even be by "la Quintrala", that is, doña Catalina de los Ríos y Lisperguer, a despotic, prosperous, seventeenth century Chilean landowner. And while she served the roast beef with native potatoes and salad she had prepared for me that Sunday noon, her movements displayed an unequivocal attitude of command and resolution. How else could she have survived in Teupa, without iron willpower, without making it clear to her neighbors it would be difficult - not to say impossible - to trample on her. For in addition to the solitude, her fear of falling ill and requiring help she also had to cope with her neighbors, rustic, atavistic peasants who did not make life particularly easy for her. Of course, life could never be easy in a world where alcoholism, suicide, sexual promiscuity and violence were so often on the rampage.

Just as the tiny Teupa cemetery harbors a curious cult to death, so the wakes when one of the peasants dies take on bizarre proportions. To the Anglo-Saxon mind, the unrestrained show of feelings so common among Hispanics would be unimaginable - even repulsive. In Chiloé death acquires strange rituals. When anyone in that rural community dies, a host of atavistic rituals come into play. These rituals, which combine religion with food and alcohol, are hard for anyone unfamiliar with the culture to understand. If the dead person's kin are well off, they slaughter a cow; while those in a less affluent position will slaughter a lamb. The sole aim is to provide food for the horde of neighbors and friends who attend the wake and the endless rites and rituals. A wake cannot be envisaged without a plentiful amount of food and a copious supply of alcohol. The corpse is placed in a coffin, which activates a string of the strangest reactions: the women, for instance, go off into a progressive state of hysteria, moaning, lamenting, wailing and screaming. Some even announce they are going to faint, which they

effectively do. The surfeit of food and libations are interspersed with the women's howling - though, of course, this is only at intervals. Two rosaries are prayed and then the chicha orgy starts. This liquor made with those tiny Chiloé apples is part of island culture. No whisky, no gin. Chicha will drown one's sorrows, set spirits on fire, cause deaths on the road and at sea, stimulate sexual promiscuity, for peasant relations between father and daughter are commonplace.

Catalina attended the wake of an elderly neighbor where at times the macabre bordered on the hilarious.

"The homes of *Chilotes*", she pointed out to me, "are built on wooden frames, so they don't have concrete foundations. This is to stop the damp from filtering up. During the wake so many people gathered at her place that the structure gave way, the coffin tilted over and the poor woman was thrown out of it."

But this was not the end of a situation macabre and amusing alike. The old lady was once again placed in her coffin, and the bereaved considered she should set off for the next world accompanied by some of her beloved possessions. The coffin was soon so full of shoes, socks and underclothes that they couldn't close the lid. Six men had to climb on top of it before they were able to screw it down. After the burial the rituals continue. A choir of wailing mourners recites the *Thousand Hail Mary's* for ten consecutive days, though obviously accompanied by liquor and food - a ritual practiced the whole year round with or without a corpse. Nor do they ignore another of their compulsive rites, which involves going to Castro to have the Tarot cards read for them. In Teupa things have happened that relate not only to death but also to extreme violence verging on dementia. It is common knowledge that the melancholia typical of Chiloé, added to the people's lack of activity throughout the long winter months and the incessant rain often lead to suicides, most usually by hanging themselves from a tree. Chilotes do not resort to a firearm or to poison - the island abounds with extremely poisonous bushes and scrubs, one of which is the fearsome *ovidia pilla pilla*, preferring instead to end their days hanging from the branch of a tree. The figure of a hanging body must have an arcane ascendant somewhere. But there are also homicides, some of which, far from being the result of a passionate rage, or drunkenness, are, in fact, the work of a psychopath.

Catalina told me that one afternoon when she returned home along that impossible road trailing down to the beach, there was a young boy close to the gate waiting for a girl who lived over the road. She stopped and said hello to him, they exchanged the conventional couple of desultory remarks, and she went on her way. That afternoon the solitary denizen of Teupa decided to devote her afternoon to gardening, this time attending to the strawberries, a unique variety which is one of the delicacies to be found in abundance on the island. An hour and a half later, while she was still kneeling on the ground weeding, Mauricio Pérez, one of her young neighbors turned up and offered to give her a hand. He couldn't have come at a better time for between them they managed to rid the strawberries of all the weeds. Mauricio worked in silence, sometimes making some terse remark, and Catalina must have thought how fortunate she was to have had this unexpected help. Yet, between the time she had met the first youth at her gate and the time Mauricio turned up in her garden, which couldn't have been as much as two hours, an appalling crime had been committed.

"Out of jealousy, Mauricio killed the youth who was waiting for the girl, right there, by the gate to my house. He dragged him off who knows where, hacked him to pieces, placed the remains in a sack and threw it down a ravine. Then, as if nothing had happened he wandered in and offered to help me. I had been working side by side with a psychopath!"

The murderer was sentenced to ten years in prison, in Castro, and not satisfied with what he had done, threatened anyone went to visit him while he was there, which was, obviously, simply another sign of his condition.

No wonder then that one should ask what Catalina Cruz is doing here, in this primitive scenario, amid unimaginable funeral rituals, homicides, psychopaths and people hanging themselves on trees, practically friendless, far removed from the mundane style of Santiago. It was, perhaps, the best refuge against the passage of time. Here there was no old age, or competition, or dependence on others; there were none of those indispensable romances, demanding wardrobes, or unseemly wealth. All this was part of her past, of passions perhaps never satisfied. All she had to do was give life and beauty to the small world she had created from nothing.

She and the universe seemed to be wholly in harmony, at one with each other.

Rubén Azócar, an intimate friend of Pablo Neruda - in fact, as mentioned in a previous chapter, the poet had been in love with Rubén's sister, Albertina, - had the original idea of writing a novel, *Gente en la isla* (People on the Island), overwhelmingly folkloric in nature at a time when Latin American narrative could not be divested of a language excessively vernacular in style. But the action took place in Chonchi, a place the author knew like the back of his hand, both from having lived there and because of family bonds. When the novel was published it unleashed a torrent of fury, for not a few people were affected. It was a *roman á clef* that uncovered the sins and weaknesses of the most prominent inhabitants in Chonchi.

"My father was furious with that book," Teresa Vera confessed to me one day. The trouble was that Chonchi had only a few residents and everybody knew everybody else. There were also some legendary figures whose characters have not been skillfully developed in other books, one of whom was, precisely, Teresa's uncle.

This legendary being was Ciríaco Álvarez.

There was a time in South America when fortunes were made overnight. The commodities of the time - rubber, tin, nitrate, coffee or cypress - might suddenly make multi-millionaires of adventurers, entrepreneurs or men with a nose for business. There were a good many who ended up becoming barons of some raw material, in realms which did not always last forever. The one that lasted longest was, undoubtedly, that created by Simón Patiño, a modest Bolivian whose tenacity and good fortune led to his finding the richest vein of tin in the world in his mine known as "La Salvadora", in the Bolivian Andes 4,400 meters above sea level. He became, obviously, the *Tin Baron*. The same could be said of Julio César Arana, one of the rubber barons, and the creator of the *Peruvian Amazon Company*, on the river Putumayo, who put thousands of Indians to death; the accounts of the horror that reigned on his plantations exceeded even those of Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*. Then there was John Thomas North, lord over the saltpeter abounding in the north of Chile, who included among his extravagances a fancy dress party he threw in the Metropole Hotel in London in 1888, which cost him ten thousand pounds sterling.

They were times of plenty, of easy money.

Ciríaco, in comparison with the others, was but a minor baron, ruling over a tiny dominion at the southernmost tip of the Chilean territory. More precisely, it was on the Guaitecas archipelago, south of Chiloé. When Charles Darwin visited these islands in 1834, on board the *Beagle*, he recorded in his travel log his impressions of the Chono Indians and of their impenetrable forests. Yet his curiosity was, most likely,

anthropological in nature, for the treasure of the Guaitecas, the *Pilgerodendron uviferum*, or more familiarly the cypress, had no commercial value at the time. It was not until 1859 that Felipe Westhoff, a German seaman, reached these remote lands and founded Melinka, a tiny settlement on the Guaitecas. His arrival, however, had little to do with naturalism but rather with mercantilism and a businessman's vision. At the time the railway linking the city of Lima to the port of Callao, in Peru, was under construction and Westhoff considered the timber on the islands the best for this enterprise. Captivated by the beauty of the forests and the sea, he took his family to Melinka, where they lived for several years.

Towards 1880, Westhoff's head start in cypress exploitation was carried on by an unassuming Chonchi inhabitant by the name of Ciríaco Álvarez, who was not exempt from certain eccentricities that characterized the South American raw materials barons. His life was a succession of challenges and audacious feats, ventures and misadventures, squandering and ferocious revenges. He started out as a fisherman, and later stockpiled timber in Melinka, loading the cypress wood on vessels bound for foreign lands. His business prospered and don Ciríaco decided to expand his trading activities - which already included seafood and furs as well as cypress wood - by building an immense schooner to transport the goods and save on freight. The cycle involving the export of typical Chiloé goods, like ham and sausage meats, to Lima was gone forever. This was the beginning of a new age, which would pave the way to unimaginable fortunes.

The sheer length and tonnage of the vessel built by Ciríaco Álvarez overwhelmed the *Chilotes* who watched impressed as the schooner one day put out to sea burdened with the most valuable cargo of cypress wood ever known: she set sail from Melinka, plowing her way due north across the waters of the Corcovado Gulf, and leaving the group of Desertores islands starboard; she kept on course towards the Chauque islands and, eventually sailed into the fearsome Chacao channel, which instilled such fear into Spanish navigators. Perhaps in her impatience to overcome the unbelievably dangerous marine currents and reach the immensity of the Pacific Ocean, the schooner paid scant attention to other no less threatening dangers. Before long she foundered on some particularly treacherous underwater rocks and in only a matter of minutes the schooner had sunk in the Chacao channel with her precious load of cypress wood.

But Ciríaco Álvarez was not a man to succumb to misfortune. He built another even larger vessel, a three-mast brig, and exploited the lucrative maritime route between Chiloé, Talcahuano and Valparaíso. But not for long. Misfortune seemed to loom over his vessels: a storm battered the brig and she went down close to the port of Talcahuano. By this time, don Ciríaco Álvarez was already immensely wealthy. His enormous house in Chonchi, only a few meters from the embankment, was a favorite meeting place for any illustrious guest visiting the town. Any dinner was incomplete without the traditional *curanto*, that rare native mix of seafood, meat and vegetables, not to mention the liqueur d'or which crowned the banquets. Perhaps he relied on receiving an equally warm welcome from his guests as ever he traveled to Santiago, which was one of his most pathetic mistakes. On a visit to the Chilean capital, he made his way to one of the most sophisticated clubs, whose members included conspicuous businessmen, landowners and bankers, in what could well be called a particularly closed circle: these salons were for the likes of the Errázuriz, the Leteliers, the Eyzaguirres, the Edwards. Don Ciríaco expected to be allowed in, but failed to go attired in the expected *de rigueur* frock coat and cravat. Wearing the "carthorse trousers and flip flops" he normally wore in Chiloé, he only managed to horrify the doorman who, naturally,

would not let him in. How could such a one even dare to think of entering one of the most respected clubs in Santiago? He was ejected practically by the scruff of his neck. But it was no easy matter to say no to Álvarez. Without more ado he made his way into a nearby store and purchased the entire outfit he required: expensive suit, shirt, cravat and shoes. He returned to the club, where he was now allowed in, walked straight up to the bar and asked how much their stock of liquor was worth. The answer was an astronomical figure. Unhesitatingly he took out a fat wallet and deposited a wad of bills on the counter.

“I am Ciríaco Álvarez from Chonchi, and tonight you are my guests, so you are all welcome to stay until you have downed the last bottle”.

His visits to the *Palacio de la Moneda*, the government house in Santiago, were no less memorable. He was not exactly unknown to ministers and presidents: they were fully aware that he was a key piece in the Chilean trading checkerboard and that down there in the south they could count on an ally. An ally who was even willing to put an end to the exploits - and life - of that bloodthirsty pirate, Ñancupel, who struck fear into the hearts of the Guaiteca women, for there are those who hold it was Ciríaco Álvarez who handed him over to the authorities. Of course, our hero was unconventional even when it came to visiting the *Palacio de la Moneda*, for although he wore a suit, it was hard to get him to wear anything other than flip flops on his feet. The mere sight of him was enough to unhinge the government house doorkeepers: convinced of the fact he was a madman they would politely ask him to withdraw. But *don* Ciríaco would show them his credentials and insist on being announced. And it never took long for some representative to come down and embrace him affectionately and procure him an interview with some high-up official.

But perhaps it was a different kind of challenge than he was used to that best portrays him. Back in the days of steamships, many were the merchant vessels that sailed into Chonchi harbor. He made a wager with the captain of one of the vessels, a friend of his, that he could make it on horseback to Castro before the ship, apparently an easy win for the seaman, for Castro was twenty kilometers from Chonchi and the road was fearsome. A ship could, instead, sail easily up the channel to the Castro fjord in no time.

That day the entire population of Chonchi thronged the embankment. The ship set sail, foghorn blowing, and thick smoke billowing out the slim chimneystack. Don Ciríaco spurred his horse into a gallop and set off as though the devil were at his back. He passed by Vilupulli, by the larch wood chapel Darwin had visited, and headed towards Nercón. We can only imagine the obstacles this stubborn rider had to face, as his horse's hooves sank into the muddy terrain, the winding road in that almost impassable forest. But the fact is that Ciríaco Álvarez made it to Castro first, and the perplexed captain had no option but to make good his wager.

Yet things did not end well for this man who had been the owner of an empire, who had the nerve to simply walk into the *Palacio de la Moneda* in Santiago, and pay for drinks all round at the most exclusive clubs in the Chilean capital, for he ended his days penniless. The house he owned on *calle Centenario* - still standing today, though in a terrible state of neglect - was auctioned off by judicial order after his death.

The truth is, the people of Chonchi have rendered meager tribute to a man who was the wealthiest in the south of Chile and never sought to conceal his humble origins.

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# THE ROOTS OF THE EARTH

South America can lay claim to many an emblematic figure who has crossed the frontiers to become the *non plus ultra* of a culture. Such is the case, for instance, of Jorge Luis Borges in Argentina, Pablo Neruda, in Chile, or Gabriel García Márquez in Colombia, to name only a few of the most outstanding proponents. The prose and remarkable abstract narrative of Borges - rather than his stories related to the urban and the earthbound - have raised him to dazzling heights. The same could be said of Neruda and his incomparable poetry, or of the magic realism - *après* Alejo Carpentier - of García Márquez. They are, no doubt, major deities in literature and poetry. But Latin America is rich in symbolical figures, in unrepeatable characters, profound connoisseurs and scholars, voracious in their eagerness to decipher the mysteries of their own land. In Chile, the fingers of one hand will suffice to count them.

During my first stay in Chiloé I had heard talk of Renato Cárdenas. It was on one of my usual forays into the Chiloé Archive - a first floor on *calle* Serrano, in Castro - that one of the employees, himself a booklover, suggested I should meet him. To anyone wishing to probe the culture and history of the island, the material in the Chiloé Archive is a veritable blessing. Cárdenas is, in fact, its current director. Yet it was not until my second incursion I was able to meet him. Teresa Vera Álvarez, the owner of the *El Antiguo Chalet*, in Chonchi, let me have the number of his cell phone, that device so essential to life on the archipelago. We arranged to meet there, at the Chiloé Archive, one midday in late spring, when the weather was more reminiscent of Siberia than of South America.

This man in his fifties conveys a peculiar energy, and his *de rigueur* attire - a long overcoat, a black and yellow checkered scarf and a black beret - has become a hallmark. For there is, in fact, nobody in Chiloé who does not recognize Renato Cárdenas, who has not read his books on Chiloé myths and beliefs, and who has not wondered at his thoughts, or his profound, albeit terse, conversation. And I was soon to discover that with him one could be sure only of the time of meeting, but never where this encounter might lead, or who might take part in it, or where it would eventually end. That noon he unexpectedly suggested inviting Norman Garin to lunch. Garin had been a *relegado* in Chiloé in the 1970s, and now practiced law in Castro. A few days earlier I had been to his law office on the first floor of a shopping arcade on *calle* O'Higgins thinking I might be able to meet him, but I not only found the place empty but unlocked, which goes to show no one in Castro is afraid of being robbed.

Renato led the way to the law courts, in search of Norman Garin who, as might have been expected, was in the midst of a rowdy hearing. We had to make time, so Cárdenas suggested going to a tiny café, far from the tourist haunts, with an outrageously anti-cosmopolitan style, where for the first time I savored apple *empanadas* and coffee, which might well head the list of Chiloé culinary delicacies.

“Norman was relegated here in Castro,” said Renato. “He was one of those who, like me, had a taste of prison, as well as physical and moral torture. He came from Antofagasta.”

We eventually went to pick up this prominent Castro lawyer and took him to lunch at Renato’s home, which came as a surprise to me. His home was in the higher part of the city on *calle* Pablo Neruda – how could it be otherwise? – and we had to stop off at the market first to buy victuals, a task our host does not normally delegate. It was a gigantic barn of a place, with the unbelievable riches of Chiloé seafood on show: uncommonly large sea salmons, outsized mussels and an enviable variety of shellfish. Loaded with this original fare, we set off for Renato’s two-storey home entirely made of wood. A maid was awaiting us in a room overlooking a tiny lake, which, as so often happens on the island, was used as a living room, dining room and kitchen. The first thing I discovered about Cárdenas were his surprisingly diverse abilities, for he can carry out a variety of household tasks - like preparing a delicious *caldillo de mariscos* (shellfish soup) over the kitchen stove - without ever losing the gist of the conversation, or his power for abstract thought, to my mind one of his greatest virtues. I have mentioned before that domestic help typically share in family meals, so it is no surprise they should also share in the conversation. Renato’s maid, a woman with features of Indian cast, spoke of the unbelievable changes that had taken place in Castro over the last few years, and the way youngsters were consuming drugs. Cárdenas listened, while methodically stirring his savory-smelling *caldillo de mariscos*.

“Wherever your have Coca Cola, you’ll have drugs,” he said suddenly.

The soda was simply a symbol, for what he actually meant was that where civilization has a hold drugs will be unavoidable – and Chiloé was, unfortunately, no exception.

Renato was born in Calén, an idyllic seaside township on the inner sea looking out onto the island of Linlin, which looks near enough to simply reach out and touch it, and onto Achao, which looms up in a blaze of light as night falls. Here there are but a sprinkling of houses, with the unfailing wooden chapel. Renato’s grandfather worked on the woodwork in the *Antiguo Chalet* built by Eulogio Vera Cárcamo in 1935, and he decided his son would study in Puerto Montt, which probably sealed the fate of young Cárdenas. For this was followed by Valparaíso, where he studied Spanish and Fine Arts at the University of Chile, in a climate where a vast sector of Chilean youth was characterized by change, ideology, politics, and a somewhat chimerical desire to change the world. The *Unión Popular* had won the elections and Salvador Allende was their new president. Economy had become chaotic, with a rampant lack of supplies (even tooth paste was hard to come by), inflation was uncontrollable, and yet, dialectics never failed, perhaps fed by the Latin American revolutions, in particular the Cuban revolution which at the time irradiated a sort of incandescent light. Latin American intellectuals traveled to Havana, which had become the epicenter for change.

Now, seated round the table after enjoying the shellfish soup, we were starting in on the inevitable *plat de résistance* in Chiloé, salmon with native potatoes. Renato Cárdenas and Norman Garin were no longer those young men, but memory is seemingly ageless, as though in some mysterious area there were neither time nor place. And it was perhaps inevitable that, stimulated by memories and perchance by the presence of a foreigner, those fateful days, those experiences nothing would ever make them forget, should once again surface. Because Cárdenas, the young man brought up in close contact with nature in Calén, the student in Valparaíso, actually believed, like so many others, that his opposition might help to change the world.



“In Valparaiso I was a member of a student brigade known as Ramona Parra and, among other things, we used to paint wall graffiti,” remembers Renato. “We used to paint graffiti on the streets, in classrooms, in unions, and, of course, we would write poetry. We were involved in what was going on in the country, in the University reform, and we were intellectually aware of what a coup d’état could mean, but we never imagined it could reach the proportions it actually did.

It was on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1973, when President Salvador Allende was brought down from power and put to death by the Armed Forces, that purgatory began for Cárdenas, as it did for Norman Garin and for so many other Chilean youths who had never even held a gun in their hands in their entire lives. He was almost immediately taken prisoner and herded onto the *Maipo*, a cargo ship belonging to the South American Steamship Company, where two hundred and seventy two political prisoners were crammed into three holds on the vessel, which was carrying gigantic rolls of paper - Chile is one of the world’s largest paper producers - to the United States. Renato was thrown into the prow hold, a murky place peopled with phantasmagoric beings who, little by little, began to take shape: they were college professors, public officials, students, and even three men dubbed “Brothers of Courage”, who belonged to no political party but had been taken prisoners simply for having taken in militant college students as paying guests in their boarding house; the students had managed to get away, and the landlords were the scapegoats.

“The first time the hatch was opened, while we were still anchored in Valparaiso, was to take us up on deck,” Cárdenas told me. “They gave us a plate of beans, but this was not the real reason why we were brought out into broad daylight: what they actually wanted was to identify certain people. The officer mounting guard at the hatch with another seaman had a sheaf of photos in his hand; as each of us groped out of the darkness into the blinding sun, he consulted them, obviously trying to identify his prisoners. That was how they recognized architecture student and MIR<sup>1</sup> militant Juan Yantok, who was brutally kicked and beaten before being led off the vessel.”

That was their macabre farewell for on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1973, four days after the military coup, the prisoners – who had only had beans to eat, along with a few apples that were tossed into the hold as though the prisoners were animals – realized the vessel was weighing anchor and getting ready to set sail. It was not long before someone discovered they were heading due north, and they somehow deduced their final destination would be Pisagua, a small seaport close to the border with Peru. This was eventually confirmed by one of their jailers who opened the hatch to tell the captives where they were being taken, in an obvious effort to placate them. For three days the *Maipo* plowed the waters of the Pacific, with its human cargo; the prisoners, condemned solely because of their ideas, had practically nothing to eat during that time, and were forced to relieve themselves wherever they could among those enormous rolls of paper.

But Pisagua was not exactly an idyllic location, for its sordid history was rife with wars and prisoners. Set at the foot of abrupt, arid mountains jutting mutinously into the sea, hard or well-nigh impossible to get to by land, this was the shipping port for the saltpeter, or niter, abounding in the region of nearby Tarapacá towards the end of the nineteenth century. And like any Latin American raw materials boom, it unleashed the most varied of passions, for fortunes were made overnight - like that of John Thomas North, the saltpeter baron - for this mineral was vitally important both as a fertilizer and in the manufacture of gunpowder. War was not long in coming to these lands: 1879 saw memorable naval battles between Chile, Bolivia and Peru, precisely in connection with

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<sup>1</sup> *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* (Revolutionary Leftwing Movement).

this particularly rich mineral. Chile emerged victorious from this encounter, Bolivia lost its entire coast on the Pacific, and Peru was forced to surrender the city of Arica. But, whichever the case may be, cannon-fire flared from memorable vessels, like the Esmeralda and the Huascar, and plumed admirals were included in the lists of founding fathers, like the Chilean Arturo Prat, the honorable spirit of nineteenth century combat.

The saltpeter frenzy subsided no sooner had the Germans discovered the way to synthesize it in a laboratory, and for decades Pisagua languished as a relic of an absurd war, which, with hindsight, can only be viewed as incorrigibly romantic. The town could, in time, have become a curiosity of almost archaeological value for scholars and those nostalgic for times gone by.

But that was not to be its fate.

Its particular geographical remoteness, hemmed in by a wall of mountains isolating it from the Andean valleys and the main townships, was used to advantage by some governments to turn it into a sort of jail provided by the bounty of nature. How could one escape when literally trapped between the mountains and an infinite ocean? Perhaps because of this, no sooner had the War of the Pacific come to an end in 1883, a contingent of Peruvians inaugurated what was to become the Pisagua "jail". But this was not to happen until the end of the 1940s, when Chilean President Gabriel González Videla confined communist leaders and militant partisans there. As fate would have it - for no other name can be given to it - while in 1947 a minor ranking military man, lieutenant Augusto Pinochet, carried out obviously repressive tasks in this remote settlement, a national senator by the name of Salvador Allende had the preposterous idea of visiting the political prisoners there. The encounter between these two men seems to have been the starting point for a long story eventually to end in tragedy. From the very first moment, as soon as Allende got to the detention center, there was open hostility between senator and military man, with this latter seeking whatever nature of hindrances to avoid the senator visiting the prisoners. But Allende was not to be intimidated; quite the contrary, he upbraided him, asking irately how an insignificant lieutenant dared deny access to a national senator. Yet when the Unión Popular came into power many years later, Pinochet, no longer a "mere lieutenant" but in the upper echelons of the military ranks, always denied it was he who was stationed in Pisagua.

Pisagua continued to be a temptation for any President. In the mid-fifties, Carlos Ibáñez del Campo, once again confined Communist Party leaders to this impregnable fortress. And latterly it has been turned into a criminal colony.

But to return to young Renato Cárdenas, just twenty three, imprisoned in a moldy hold in the Maipo on his way to Pisagua, where the vessel put into port on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 1973, after three days at sea. Imagine his feelings, no sooner was he brought up on deck, on seeing that parched desert landscape for the first time, in all its grandeur and petrifying isolation. What a difference with the colors of Chiloé, the gentleness of its surroundings, the serenity conveyed by its hills. In Pisagua all that existed was sea and sand. As they approached the pier in dull gray rubber dinghies, he discovered there were also other realities which had nothing to do with nature: an unusual display of military forces and a commander, Sergio Larrain, the executive arm of punishment, tortures and shootings. His welcome could hardly have been more cheerless.

"All of you are prisoners of war," barked Larrain, "and anyone who revolts or tries to make a getaway will be executed with another nine taken at random."

There were eight large twenty square meter cells, the living quarters for over forty people.

“The food rations were miserable,” Renato told me. “Imagine my reaction when, after a time, I was strolling with a few of the inmates from one end of the camp to the other in a travesty of choreography, and a small packet suddenly fell at my feet, thrown into the enclosure by someone uninvolved in this hall of horrors. It was a little bag with browned corn flour, and to us it was like savoring the most delicious of Swiss chocolate.

But it was not the crowded cells, or the condition of the three murky toilets, or the isolation of Pisagua which kept Cárdenas and his mates awake at night. It was the everyday tortures, the ill treatment, the abuse, the affronts they were systematically subjected to, like a perverse, never-ending rite. They were made to walk blindfold out into the yard, their hands tied behind their back, and there they were savagely beaten by the soldiers, who left them lying there bruised and bleeding. The worst of it was that Commander Larrain was using these cruel rites to “teach” his subordinates how to punish civilians. Then came the most fearsome of times: the soldiers started executing some of the prisoners by decision of a War Council, or to enforce the Escaping Prisoners Act, or even worse, during a torture session.

But talking of executions, or simply saying there were twenty-two who died, is no more than simply cold figures falling into a somewhat abstract, unpersonalized category. Figures will never make shudders run down your back like the death of a single person might. Take, for instance, just a few of those who left their lives in that desolate seaport.

**Michel Selim Nash Saez.** 19. Conscripted soldier. Militant in the Juventudes Comunistas (Communist Youth Movement). Executed to enforce the Escaping Prisoners Act dated September 29, 1973.

Who can conceive of a nineteen-year-old youth being shot for trying to escape - if this was actually the reason - from a dehumanized prison? What was it made these executioners stand a teenager against a wall and riddle him with bullets?

**Germán Palominos Lamas.** 31. Carpenter. Militant in the socialist party. Shot by order of the War Council on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1973.

It is mind-boggling to think a punishment of this nature could be meted out to a carpenter who believed the left might be the solution for Chile. It was even more difficult to establish the rationale for condemning some and pardoning others. Renato Cárdenas, a prisoner in Pisagua at twenty-three, was not unaware of this. What were the chances he might be the next victim? Each of his jailers’ movements, each of their gestures, must have seemed to him like a fateful omen of death. But even in gruesome situations like these, parody is wont to surface. And it was not long before they were all forced to discard the mask of Greek tragedy and don the mask of comedy to welcome the International Red Cross Overseer who was to visit Pisagua to see how the political prisoners there were being treated. Commander Larrain prepared a *mise en scène* which would have done justice to the most celebrated European theater directors. First a major cleanout had to be performed on the great theater, an early twentieth century sanctuary where it was said even Enrico Caruso had sung, a fact which was not surprising considering the wealth wrung from the saltpeter industry, which would have allowed them to hire the greatest of lyrical gods. Then, when the Overseer came, the prisoners were required to act out a work of fiction, with rigorously laid down dialogues, movements and scenes. But this was not on stage, but on the sands of Pisagua.

None of them forgot their lines and the characters well so well represented even the visiting official was impressed. When the refined, dapper International Red Cross Overseer arrived, impeccably clad in light colors particularly appropriate to a sandy environment, he might have thought he was on the beach of Malibu, or in Viña del Mar: some of the prisoners were playing ball on the beach, others sat on the sand at games of chess and checkers and the ones who were severely bruised because of the way they had been beaten were swimming out in the sea - without even a soldier to watch them!

“Actually,” Renato told me, “the soldiers were camouflaged in the watchtowers, strategically placed to ensure they would not miss any attempt at escape or mutiny. The conversation with the Overseer,” he went on, an ironic smile playing around his lips as he recalled the absurd situation, “was also rehearsed: we responded we were well, despite the circumstances.”

It is frankly surprising that the authorities of the International Red Cross - in this case the Overseer - had not learned from the lessons left by history no more than thirty years earlier, not two hundred. Had they never heard speak of Theresienstadt? There, in an ancient eighteenth century fortress on the outskirts of Prague, during World War II, the Nazis mounted one of the most chilling parodies to prove not only that they were not exterminating Jews but that these people were living in conditions little short of paradise. This ghetto that housed Jewish intellectuals, artists and academics was no more than a transit area towards the concentration camps in the east, for most of them ended up in the gas chambers at Auschwitz. But the world was already aware of the nazi extermination policy and the darkest of versions were infiltrated about the treatment given to European Jews and their gruesome end. On July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1944, International Red Cross authorities visited Theresienstadt, which, as if by magic, had undergone an unexpected metamorphosis. A flawless front had been mounted, with cafés, a park bench, gardens, flowerbeds, stores – which were only a façade –, and even a school. How could the world ever come to believe that National Socialist concentration camps were extermination camps? For there was Theresienstadt, where people lived better than in Paris or London even. Its inhabitants were privileged. Where would one find such a choir as the one they had there, made up of men, women and children? The International Red Cross swallowed the bait and announced to the world that its suspicions were unfounded.

To make all this humbug more believable, what better than to take advantage of the presence on this false stage of legendary German Jewish actor and director, Kurt Gerron, who had acted with Marlene Dietrich and Emil Jannings in *The Blue Angel*, back in 1930, and had decided not to flee from Germany as so many of his counterparts had done. He filmed a documentary on Theresienstadt crowded with images of children happily gorging themselves on cakes, ladies knitting and impeccably dressed men, images never actually seen during the war. No one can blame Gerron for agreeing to take part in that parody to save his own life. Yet most of the cast, the entire choir and even Gerron himself were deported to Auschwitz, where they were put to death. Kurt Gerron, who never believed Hitler would go to those extremes, died in the gas chamber just the day before Nazi authorities finally put an end for ever to this form of extermination.

But, to return to Pisagua, where another International Red Cross official was rising to a new bait. Why did the prisoners accept this parody of freedom and relaxation instead of denouncing what was actually happening? Simply because Commander Larrain had warned that whoever talked out of turn would have to face the consequences.

Which, of course, were easy to imagine in Pisagua.

Norman Garin also suffered imprisonment and uncertainty. While he listened to Renato's account during that memorable lunch, he would nod at intervals, like one not only intellectually acknowledging another's experiences, but as one who had also drunk from those waters. His story was little different, though it took place in Antofagasta, where he lived at the time, and where he held a prominent public office. But, like Cárdenas, he too survived and one day found himself on a bus headed for Chiloé, specifically for Castro, as a *relegado*, with only the clothes on his back and not a penny to his name. What this young lawyer perhaps never imagined was that, instead of a punishment, he had been given an unexpected bonus, something he would come to discover as the years went by. For after more than quarter of a century he is still living in Chiloé, and working as a lawyer. But his beginnings on the island were not what might be called easy. Practically penniless, a musician by vocation, a lover of poetry, who probably studied law simply to keep his parents contented, though this may have been one of the wisest decisions in his life. People say that when he first came to Castro, no longer in the first flush of youth - for he is several years older than Cárdenas - he used to stumble blindly about like a sleepwalker. But the left-wing sympathizers gave him a hand, as happened with the *relegados* in Chonchi, or in other Chiloé cities, where these pariahs confined to remote places never experienced cold-shouldering or indifference. The first to give him a hand were a group of lawyers, *relegados* like himself, who rented him a place in the house they lived in. The room soon became an office where he was gradually allowed to practice his profession, for the authorities did not get in his way, provided he did not move out of Castro. But the law-courts were in this city and it was not long before he became known as bulwark for those left-wing supporters who started to make use of his services. One of his first clients was Rosa Pérez Pinto, the Chonchi dweller who did so much to ensure the *relegados* would not die of hunger. It was simply a statement of heirs, but no doubt Norman felt it had saved his life. Some time later he sent for his family and, in contrast to others who were confined there transitorily, set up his home in Chiloé where he has lived ever since.

Lunch at Renato Cárdenas home had finished, and we were delighting in an exquisite myrtle berry liqueur, one of those delicious island specialties. The encounter had been a catharsis, evoking past sufferings which would ever be present in the minds of these two men who shared a surprisingly similar past.

Now, almost thirty years later, Cárdenas' view on those fateful days has changed, and in contrast to many Latin Americans who suffered imprisonment and torture, he has learned to acknowledge the mistakes made by a political movement, while discovering in body if not in mind, the darkest side of human nature.

"When I understood what was going on in Pisagua, I gave myself a psychological order," explains Renato. "I discovered the ugliness of human condition, where there were executioners and victims. Being aware of the extremes of evil a man can reach will eventually break down any personal structures you might have. And until the dictatorship came to an end in Chile, I was involved in something every day, which led to a change in my professional life."

For many young Hispanics, the political trends of the time, from the Cuban experience to Liberation Theology, contributed to the belief that ancestral political systems might be modified, and that ideology was enough for a country to forge ahead. Not that Renato thinks this way today. While refilling his long-stemmed glass with that

delicious liqueur, it was as though he were not only making a confession, but also revealing some other aspects of his life experience.

“Just like any other student from the bourgeoisie on this continent, we used to play with the tantalizing subject of revolution – the perfect proposal for a human being,” he admitted. “Before the military coup, the life we led was like a fairytale.”

His vision of the past, both his own and that of Chilean intellectuals, has changed dramatically over the years, on the strength of what life has taught him. He admits the socialism they built before 1973 was merely “book socialism”, their vision as an attempt to change reality. What he discovered only too late was that it was no more than an intellectual tool.

“The greatest blow by Pinochet’s dictatorship was against intellectuals. Because they had no roots,” he concluded.

One day captivity in Pisagua came to an end and the young prisoner, Renato Cárdenas, who had suffered to the very marrow of his bones the extremes mankind could stoop to, had to take a decision as to what he would do with his life. Initially he thought Chile had little more to offer him. How could he live in this bloodied, stifled country? It was then he had the idea of going to live in the United States, following the path of so many exiles in the seventies: Argentina, Sweden and Holland sheltered Chilean journalists, intellectuals, politicians and militants who had managed to flee from the horror and found refuge in countries with another kind of culture. He had bought a ticket to go and settle in the States, yet it was ultimately Chiloé that made sense of his existence. For during that stay in Calén, on the seashore (or *bordemar*, to use the name Chiloé people give to the culture of those who live by the water’s edge), in the house his father had built on the beach, he discovered his roots were deeply embedded in that land, and held there not only by family ties but also by the ethnic wealth they laid claim to. He started working as a teacher, a task he found far from easy, for he was fired on several occasions for his political beliefs. Yet he carried on undaunted, eagerly awaiting the time when Chiloé would open the doors of the world to him.

Over the years he has become the person with most knowledge about the island, and the information at his fingertips can sometimes be amazing: nothing has escaped his keen, critical eye, from history, anthropology, beliefs to the last of the demonic beings peopling the archipelago, the botanical diversity and the surprising water and land fauna. He is a prolific writer - I have already quoted from his *El libro de la Mitología* (Book of Mythology), arguably the most ambitious of his works - and did more than ten years research into the beliefs of the islanders which are, to be sure, indisputably curious. The best example of this is his *Manual del pensamiento mágico y la creencia popular* (Manual on Magical Thinking and Popular Belief), written in collaboration with Catherine Hall, the American woman he was married to. This delicious book provides some insight into the kind of thinking prevailing on the island, the taboos and prejudices passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation. It is a compendium where everything in existence has an explanation and where sense can be made of ciphers, presages and deaths using magical thinking. In Calén, the township where he was born, villagers still believe in some of these adages.

To trap a warlock, trace a cross in the air with a knife, or call him by his name in flight. To kill him draw a cross on the bullet, or spray it with holy water for otherwise the weapon will not go off.

In Chaulinec, one of the smaller islands on the archipelago, the procedure is more straightforward: simply leave a broomstick behind the door so the warlock is unable to get away.

It would be nigh impossible to list all the beliefs of the Chilotes, some of which were most likely introduced by the Europeans. But for the most part they are autochthonous, and amazing not only because of all they involve but also because of the rituals required to avoid certain evils; meteorological predictions based on the behavior or flight of particular birds, to name only one of the hundreds of presages abounding on the archipelago and in each village, apparently always the depository of some great truth, or the owner of that vital alchemy that keeps evil spirits at bay.

It is, in short, everything connected with life and death, voiced in primitive, though immensely rich, popular belief.

Unpredictably, as was his habit, Renato Cárdenas showed me unexpected places on the island. He detests anything hinting at schedule, be it lunch on a particular day or anything else that might tie him down to a particular time, precisely because his life and timetables are anything but conventional. Thus it was that one day, out of the blue, we set off with Laura, the young Spanish anthropologist, to the island of Quinchao, opposite Dalcahue, a short distance from Castro. I had visited the island on my first trip and had already felt the impact of that incomparably beautiful place I shall first describe in its original version. In the company of Renato, places seem to take on a different dimension.

There is a ferry to cross people over the narrow canal between Quinchao and Dalcahue. On my first incursion, that Sunday in summer, an enormous yacht was anchored in the middle of the fjord, reminiscent of the 1930's: entirely made of varnished wood, it flaunted a design which, though outmoded, was fascinating. No one walked its decks, which gave it an almost ghostly air. I later heard it belonged to a prosperous businessman who, weary of urban life and stress, had bought the vessel, reconditioned it, and since then sailed the fjords of Chiloé. The ferry over to Quinchao was, instead, pluralistic. Vans, cars, peasants in their Sunday best, smart backpackers from Santiago and seducible young ladies all crowded in together. Mention should perhaps be made, too, of the sea lions that so often swim round the boat before it sets off. And Sunday, I might mention in passing, is the day the Dalcahue fair is held, in actual fact an event more like a Persian bazaar than a craftsmen's center: sports shoes, jeans and clothes of dubious taste jam the stalls by the sea. Yet there is one building – made of wood, as it should be – where real Chiloé craftsmanship can be appreciated, this time using the wool of sheep from the more than forty islands making up the archipelago. There are some remarkable bedspreads the Indians attempt to sell to travelers, by whatever means.

An islander did, in fact, attempt to sell me one for a queen-size bed at an absurdly high price.

"I'm divorced," I told her, disdaining the ample size of the coverlet.

"Very simple," she retorted, "I'll just cut it down the middle and you'll have one to spare."

It was not there I bought the bedcover that keeps me warm on winter nights, but in Chonchi, where I watched the finishing touches given to it on a horizontal loom by a skillful native artisan.

Taking the ferry to Quinchao Island also means overhearing the inevitable conversations between the passengers out on the deck. A young couple of backpackers from Santiago –college students, most likely related to the Basque Chilean aristocracy – confessed they had come to Chiloé to do exactly the opposite of what they did at home in Santiago. I had little difficulty in imagining them back there, traveling around in their luxurious automobiles or strolling around Las Condes or Providencia, two of the upper class neighborhoods. But in these southern parts they got about mostly on foot, slept at modest boarding rooms and ate but frugally. When the ferry tied up on the opposite shore they refused my invitation to take them by car to Curaco de Vélez, preferring to make the journey on foot. What is it that transforms two young Santiago yuppies, used to all the creature comforts, into two globetrotters defying their own cultural origins? Most likely the landscape and its surroundings, as well as the fleetingness of this bucolic experience. The search for something entirely different, both geographically and culturally speaking, leads young people to unsuspected extremes, provided it is relatively brief and does not threaten their system. The enthusiasm for Chiloé this blonde young girl of no more than twenty-two exuded was, no doubt, authentic. But once back in the city this would be no more than a memory, an anecdote appropriate for social get-togethers among college mates, or at some mundane cocktail party. How marvelous to be able to discuss the alternatives of rustic living! But that is precisely what it was all about. About slipping across scenarios and cultures with the same ease as walking through a shopping mall. This is something inherent to prosperous Chilean youth.

Very different, of course, was the conversation between a Chiloé islander – probably from Quinchao – and a young girl who had arrived on a carrier crammed with petit bourgeois tourists. Rather than a conversation, it was an implacable seduction exercise, with the lass negligently leaning on the railing, interested only – at least apparently – in the blue waters of the Dalcahue channel, adroitly resisting the young man’s assault with subtly studied indifference. The young islander wore an immaculate white shirt and smelt of perfume.

“Lovely ring you’re wearing,” he said to her, in a ruse to touch her hand. “Some time ago I gave a girl one like it, but as things didn’t work out I asked her for it back.”

I must confess I thought it just the opposite of romantic, but the girl did not even flinch. That evening doubtless they went dancing at a discotheque in Castro.

The first surprise on the island of Quinchao is not the landscape, but the perfectly asphalt-surfaced road, hardly less than a luxury. It was once the most prosperous island in Chiloé, because the Jesuits had established their center of operations in Achao, and there were several encomiendas there at the time. It was, also, the most cultivated region, in other words, the area where the impenetrable forests had most been thinned. Charles Darwin described it thus.

*The two succeeding days were fine, and at night we reached the island of Quinchao. This neighbourhood is the most cultivated part of the Archipelago; for a broad strip of land on the coast of the main island, as well as on many of the smaller adjoining ones, is almost completely cleared. Some of the farmhouses seemed very comfortable. I was curious to ascertain how rich any of these people might be, but Mr. Douglas says that no one can be considered as possessing a regular income. One of the richest landowners might possibly accumulate, in a long industrious life, as much as 1000 pounds sterling: but should this happen, it will all be stowed away in some secret corner, for it is the custom of almost every family to have a jar or treasure-chest buried in the ground.*



To speak of Curaco de Vélez (from cura, stone and co, water), without being overly subjective, is to refer necessarily to the most beautiful houses in Chiloé. This hamlet, tiny in comparison with Castro or Ancud, rivals them in history and surpasses them in beauty. The Jesuits settled there in the early eighteenth century; long before that time, however, towards the end of the sixteenth century, Vélez founded his *encomienda* – which is why the place bears his name. There the schooner Ancud picked up pilot Carlos Miller, who was to help make the Magellan Strait Chilean. In mid nineteenth century, the township experienced a cattle and whaling boom that lasted until the end of that century and well into the twentieth century, and contributed to the construction of neo-European residences unique of their kind. Like many Chiloé townships, its superb church was devastated by fire, and the 1960 earthquake led to the disappearance of part of the city. But Curaco de Vélez is, to some extent, another Macondo in Latin America, with times of splendor, decadence and oblivion.

Yet the two-storey larch-covered houses have remained intact, as though some mysterious force had preserved them from the neglect that had so affected other constructions in Chonchi; all of them, of course, lined the sidewalks of calle Errázuriz – what other name would one expect in Chile? This prestigious Chilean family of noteworthy politicians and diplomats has had a strong inclination towards architecture: the most dazzling residence in Buenos Aires, which has now been turned into a museum, is, precisely, the Palacio Errázuriz, the result of the convenient marriage between Matías Errázuriz, Chilean ambassador to Argentina, and the porteña multi-millionaire Josefina de Alvear, in the dawn of the twentieth century. In a tiny village on the island of Quinchao, this surname is still related to the best in architecture. One cannot help wondering, then, what exactly happened in Curaco de Vélez for it to have fallen into oblivion, after so many prosperous families had built their homes there. Like in Macondo, the whaling, cattle-farming cycle simply came to an end. Which is not surprising in Latin America, for there were several regions that rose and fell abruptly due to the brief economic cycles related to raw materials: rubber, in the Amazon; nitrate, in the north of Chile; cypress in Chiloé. There were, too, plagues that devastated the town. Between 1950 and 1960 the Curaco de Vélez plantations were devastated by *tizón*, a fungus that attacks and destroys potato crops – as well as the island economy – and which led to the compulsory emigration of twenty per cent of the population in search of better horizons.

But suffice it to contemplate one house in particular on calle Errázuriz, to gain some insight into what timber means to Chiloé dwellers. This neo-European style three-storey residence, with jutting windows, built by some very imaginative architect, is no more than a sample of a culture profoundly linked to trees. To my disappointment, on my second visit the house had been altered, and had lost its sublime aesthetic appeal. It is worth noting that absolutely everything in Chiloé is made of wood. It is not only the houses themselves that are built of timber, but also the foundations, a sort of skeleton to support the construction and avoid the insidious effect of the damp. Since time immemorial vessels have been built with island timber. Pathways are opened up in the forest using logs placed crosswise, to make the going easier for the horses. Everyday life is related to timber: firewood for the Chiloé kitchen range where the family gathers for meals and to seek refuge from the cold, and which is part of people's daily activities, and their form of communication. And then there are the *artilugios*, ancestral Chiloé tools, designed by a people who had no access to metals.

Can anyone imagine an anchor not made of iron? In Chiloé, where sailing is the most efficient form of transport, it would have been impossible to make an iron anchor. So, they created the *sacho*, a vernacular contrivance with a similar function, and

involving a heavy stone skillfully imprisoned between two pieces of wood in the shape of a cross, and which some fishermen continue to use to this day. The windmills – so plentiful in Curaco de Vélez – and so useful in grinding, were made of wood, with the exception of the two grindstones. The list could go on forever, for it includes the harrow pulled by oxen, looms, apple presses for making cider, fences, and the acme of ingenuity when there is a dearth of minerals: keyholes and padlocks made of wood. It is no wonder, then, that a veritable culture should have built up around trees.

The paradox, however, considering this abundance of timber is that woodworking should have progressively lessened as a basic activity, that the forests should have been devastated, without the required replacement of species, and that timber – though abounding – should have little added value to enable Chiloé to place finished goods on foreign markets. In this connection there is an interesting paper written by Roberto Santana, from the Universidad de Los Lagos, in Osorno, a profound authority on the situation in Chiloé.

*It is doubtless true that nowadays the domestic furniture manufacture for family use has practically disappeared and that families come by what they need by ordering them off one of the few furniture manufacturers still to be found in the towns or villages, or buying industrially produced furnishings. Yet, in the not so distant past, say in the 1940s or 1950s, each head of family still undertook the manufacture of any furniture required for equipping their home. Each was a timber craftsman, just as he was an agriculturer, or a fisherman if the family lived close to the sea. In general terms, any adult man in Chiloé was required to manufacture his own utensils, helping his parents and following in their steps. Carpentry was learnt from when they were very young. No young man could even contemplate the idea of marriage without undergoing that veritable “initiation” involved in learning about woodworking, and would be required to make for himself all the furnishings, even the marital bed. Each home had an indispensable array of useful gadgets kept in a trunk or “tool box”.*

Edward Rojas, the leader of the Architectural Workshop in Castro, and Renato Vivaldi, go far beyond this description when trying to establish the link between the Chilote and timber. “Their very acts and objects are spawned from timber: with it they have gradually built up a world around them, their utensils, their embarkations, their architecture”, they hold.

Yet, Formica and mass made furniture are what prevail today, when a young man decides to marry. There are still craftsmen, of course, but only a few. The invasion of products from the Chilean continent has put an end to a cultural tradition. What could be more thrilling or touching than selecting the timber and settling down to make a chair, a table, a bed with one’s own hands? In that very act of craftsmanship was the continuation of these people’s roots, the strengthening and perpetration of the relationship between father and son, stimulating not only craftsmanship but also creativity in the design of each piece of furniture, each utensil.

But this is not all that has been lost. For the Chilotes cannot fathom what to do to provide timber with added value, to cater to this world we live in. This could never be done individually but in association with others. It would involve, for example, if anyone actually wanted to try it, exporting furniture, a craftsmen’s union, the required bank loans, a system for drying off the timber, competitive designs, creative marketing techniques, export know how, in short, a calibrated, systematic rigmarole aimed at

achieving a certain goal. Can all this be asked of a native of Chiloé? It is difficult, well nigh impossible. Their own history condemns them. Their insularity, the oblivion they were submerged in by central government authorities, their having to survive when left to their own resources, it all eventually led to the growth in each individual of an autarchic, individualistic personality.

The house on calle Errázuriz, in Curaco de Vélez, was in this sense emblematic, a perfect example of what can be done with wood. In the hands of a Swiss, it would most likely have become an export model. In the hands of a Chilote, it was an impossibly nostalgic postcard – and a sight for sore eyes. From whatever angle one looked at it, it never failed in its grandeur, originality and unique character. I wondered who lived there. The only person I saw was a young woman, though I did hear numerous voices I presumed belonged to her tenants.

On my second journey to Chiloé and Curaco de Vélez, the house on calle Errázuriz – which is the name I eventually gave it – had changed dramatically. The windows overlooking the roof were no longer there and had been replaced by others made of zinc. I was grateful for having been able to become acquainted with the original version, and treasured the photos I had taken of it.

Getting to Achao from Curaco de Vélez means confronting the continental fjords and volcanoes. From those heights, and slithering down the winding asphalt road, the view takes on particular magnificence. Few places in Chiloé provide such a perfect, unspoiled panorama, provided the weather holds. That Sunday in January the weather held, and the cloudless sky meant the archipelago could be seen in all its grandeur. And there, just an arm's-length away, were the islands: Linlin, Quenac, Meulin, no more than names on a map, unexpectedly embodies in their full grandeur. Cartography buffs, myself among them, delight in contemplating geographical names and data, but these are no more than just exercises on a map which ignores reality. What I saw from the road that afternoon was the real thing, a far reach from simply names. And the view of Achao, as the road subsides towards the village, is no less alluring.

This was not, however, the case during my second visit, in the company of Renato Cárdenas and Laura, during a particularly rigorous late spring. Under an overcast sky Achao could hardly be seen, and those irreplaceable continental volcanoes were entirely concealed from view. We were on our way to see the oldest wooden church in Chiloé, even perhaps in the entire south of Chile: Santa María de Loreto, built by the Jesuits around 1760. Of course, all that remains of that original construction is the shell, for it underwent a variety of alterations over the following centuries, which do not render it in any way less splendid. Quite the opposite, they have turned it into something awe-inspiring, sublime. A detailed description of its interior could never do it justice; suffice it to say that its Lutheran-Baroque-Indian style causes visual emotion – precisely what art is supposed to do. Here it is unsurpassed, with the incredible mix of natural timber and cobalt blue, and the naïf altar which is doubtless unique of its kind. And as a tribute to a culture built around trees, it is worth noting that for a very long time the church had not a single metal nail, but wooden pegs.

The problem was that Santa María de Loreto was closed, which did not deter Renato, who soon found the key, or at least, a lady who had the key in her possession. We were thus able to elude the inevitable tourist guides abounding in summer, with their parroted historical scripts, surprisingly alike and monotonous, about the origins of this temple. Renato, though, was always able to reveal some obscure secret one would never find in tourist brochures.

“The wooden pegs used in building this church were the result of an incredible twist of destiny,” he explained. “In 1743 a Jesuit father made a journey to the Guayanecas archipelago, where he found the remains of the frigate Wager. John Byron, Lord Byron’s grandfather, had traveled on. He was able to salvage two hundred kilos of metal nails, which he carried joyfully back to Achao to use in the Santa María de Loreto church”.

But no sooner had he set foot on land he was searched by the Spanish authorities, who confiscated the nails, and put him in prison. The reaction was soon felt. The Jesuit Principal was livid. How could the powers that be dare to incarcerate one of his priests simply for carrying metal nails to be used in building a Catholic church? Not to mention the fact he had gone practically to the ends of the earth to find them. He burst into the Chiloé governor’s residence and told him roundly that if he did not have the Jesuit freed he would be excommunicated. Paradoxically, here, on a remote island in the south Pacific, the scene between Pope Gregory VII and the emperor Henry IV was being re-enacted – without the symphonic grandeur, and with the modesty of a fledgling chamber orchestra. But the governor was in no way willing to drag himself symbolically as far as the Canossa castle to plead for ecclesiastic pardon, much less jeopardize his authority because of an ill-timed excommunication. He freed the Jesuit immediately, but the nails were never returned. How would they rebuild Santa María de Loreto? There might be no metal, but timber and wits abounded. Hundreds of wooden pegs were made and used, and for many years they were a cause not only of curiosity but also of pride.

However wood, though matchless in its nobility and visual impact, can be tricky. I was suddenly struck, that cold spring morning, in the solitude of a church without a congregation or hordes of visitors, by the sight of an electric vacuum cleaner in one of the naves. Whoever could have thought of cleaning a gigantic place of this size with an electronic device suitable for a room, perhaps, but not for a building of these proportions? It was like trying to use a feather broom to dust off the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles.

“The problem is the woodworm which abounds everywhere,” pointed out the lady who had opened the door for us. “And woodworm feed mainly on dust, which is why you can’t sweep the floor or use a feather broom, because they would multiply lethally. Dust can be removed only with an electric vacuum cleaner. Besides, precisely because of the woodworm, as well as the damp and a few other problems, the timbers have to be replaced every forty years,” she concluded.

Nobody should leave Achao without first lunching at the Mar y Velas, a restaurant basically very similar to many others scattered round Chiloé: entirely made of timber, with an area for those who only want to drink beer, and another area, brighter and with a better view, looking out onto the sea and the passing vessels, which lives up to its name (Sea and Sails). The director of the Achao Municipal Library joined us and, seated at a strategic table close to the window, we were afforded a unique view of the islands. There is a ceaseless movement of the islanders, teeming into the launches setting off for Linlin or Llingua, loaded down with their requisite shopping bags. That midday the restaurant was crowded with foreigners. There is something that seems to lead Europeans in these latitudes in search of what is primitive, a *sehnsucht* for past cultures and an inordinate interest in gastronomy, for they cross-question the waiter asking for interminable explanations about what choros, cholgas or locos are, or about how Parmesan oysters are prepared.

The first floor of the Mar y Velas provides clearer insight into the relationship that exists in Chiloé between the timber culture and the sea. Imagine for an instant that

nature instead of lavishing profuse forests with an ample variety of trees on the Chilotes had condemned them to a dry, stony land, with scant vegetation. Their culture would no doubt have been entirely different, and needless to say, less wealthy. For timber provided them with a supreme resource: the vessels communicating the islands in the archipelago, and affording a means to travel from one point to another on the same island, no mean feat in years gone by when this meant defying the impassable forests. Just as the forefathers of the huilliches, the chonos, carved out their canoes to be able to slip between the tangle of islands and go fishing, primitive Chilotes designed the dalca, an embarkation propelled by oarsmen, surprisingly easy to maneuver in waters with threatening currents and eddies, which made even the Spaniards marvel. What could a stolid caravel depending solely on the winds – and only some of them, at that, for these vessels could not sail close to the wind – do compared to these graceful dalcas with the nimbleness of a modern motor launch. And then, when civilization invaded the island – at the hands of the Jesuits rather than the encomenderos – Chilote ingenuity soon included sails in their design. This was how the lancha, the chalupón and the goleta were spawned, thanks to the enormous variety of timber that could be used in naval construction: coehue, cypress, larch, luma, to mention only a few of the most important.

This close relationship between timber and sea contributed to the creation of legends, heroes, pirates and mythological deities. How else could Chile have annexed the Strait of Magellan without the trees that provided the means to build the schooner Ancud, not to mention, of course, the epic spirit of its crew? How else could Ciríaco Álvarez, the cypress king, have got into the Casa de la Moneda in Santiago and been welcomed by government officials and ministers, had it not been for a tree in the Guaitecas, that turned him into a millionaire almost overnight. Nor would popular ingenuity have created the Thrauco, that minute being that raped young girls in the heart of the forest, or the pirate Ñancupel, who terrorized sailors making use of embarkations built with Chilote timber.

It was a perfect combination, and still is: in each kitchen fire, in each wall, in each roof, in each barge lying on the beach at low tide, is life, memory and the future.

From the Mar y Velas restaurant one could also make out a faraway coast, hardly visible through the thick clouds and downpours, an essential reference for Renato Cárdenas. In fact, the more sharp-sighted might be able to pick out on the horizon a handful of buildings: Calen, where he had been born, where he had discovered his roots and, ultimately, where we were to spend the weekend.

Our trip to Calen turned into a sort of southern safari, with an unsuspected number of guests gradually joining in. I had originally tried to imagine how I would spend those two days alone in my dialogue with Renato Cárdenas, how I would approach the never-ending questions into his life, his background, his partners, as though it been an encounter between two British intellectuals by the fireside in a typical Devonshire cottage. Nothing could have been further from reality and, yet, I will never forget those few days I spent in Calen. We set out in my unexpectedly full van, with Laura, another friend of Renato's who worked in the Chiloé archive, and Renato himself. His vehicle, a small 4-wheel drive Japanese Suzuki left for the same destination at a different time carrying another carload of guests – for Cárdenas has never learnt how to drive. In Dalcahue, when we set out on the gravel road to Calen I put a recorded CD in the player, without knowing exactly what it was. The ensuing

sounds could hardly have been further from Chilote musical guidelines: it was Margot Coeur Gros, sung by Edith Piaf. Yet the singer's incomparable power and emotion, her rhythm with java reminiscences delighted my fellow travelers whom I expected to take this, either due to their age or culture, as an archeological curiosity. It turned out, however, to be just the opposite. That music, that unique voice, seemed made for the profound ravines of Chiloé and had in no way lost its capacity for surprise.

Driving down to Calen in a van could be likened to skiing down from the summit of the Everest, and surely the driver cannot help wondering how the vehicle will make it back up the mountain slope. But these fears dissolve at the mere sight of this hamlet by the sea, with its wooden chapel, and the coast stretching as far as Tenaun, with a sudden surprising hill scuttling into the sea. Though unpredictable, Renato is a domestically organized man. Which is undoubtedly a relief, for the following day, apart from all those who were there already, a party of fifteen arrived from Santiago, most of them members of a folklore dance company. The Freudian focus, which is the first thing that comes to mind to explain this need for so much company, does not work with Renato Cárdenas. Nor does the Kleinian, or the Lacanian. The option of relating good and bad, or the schizo-paranoid position – we were to miss Melanie Klein that day – to our host's behavior would simply have been nonsense. Renato loves company, he loves turning his home in Calen or in Castro into a veritable open house, waiting on his guests, deploying his amazing knowledge – when the household chores give him the time to do so – and, as so often happens, giving up his own bed for someone to feel more comfortable. The constellation surrounding him, and reflecting the incandescent light he irradiates, is made up of students, artists, musicians, journalists and writers, as well as his personal friends. Nor is he fond of being questioned, when someone is curious about his past. He prefers to say what he likes, when he likes.

Many people – myself included – have dreamt at times of living in some tropical paradise where by simply stretching an arm out the window they can pick avocados or mangos growing as though by magic, or any other exotic fruit from the tropics. Calen is, to a certain extent, this dream come true. The mere fact of thinking about how to feed over twenty people in a tiny village where there is not even a supermarket would render many sleepless. But here nature is prodigious or, as anthropologists and sociologists might technically put it, the economy of subsistence still works. For Renato Cárdenas, preparing multifarious menus is hardly a challenge; in fact, it is something he does practically everyday. The first thing we did on arrival, no sooner had the tide gone out, was to take a sort of hoe and head for the now entirely exposed pebbly beach. It takes a sharp eye to discover the rocks dripping a fine spurt of water, for that is where the clams are. This is what is meant by *mariscar*, a wholly Chilote activity – unsuitable for anyone prone to backache. There on the beach, leaning over the rocks, they knock on the stones and separate them until not one, but a horde of shellfish emerge. Our *caldillo* was thereby catered for, and a basket of varied shellfish was enough to feed a regiment. This had to be followed, of course, with the usual sea salmon. Fortunately, there is no need to go out fishing for it with rods and complicated gear. Simply stretch out a hand to a net there on the edge the sea, and, as if by magic, several salmon are caught up in it. The inevitable potatoes are just a matter of meters from the house, on a steep slope, so there is another problem solved. But then, Chiloé cuisine can also include some delicacies like oysters (which can be found in many places) or *choros zapato*, which are simply gigantic mussels. Now that is a tougher job – though not too tough – for these shellfish are to be found about 50 meters out to sea, in breeders, which are simply ropes that sink in the sea, and which the mussels cling to.

As might have been imagined, the fifteen people from Santiago had traveled the one thousand three hundred kilometers to Chiloé by bus simply to spend that long weekend of December 8<sup>th</sup>, the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, there. How would they get from Castro to Calen, a tiny hamlet with very scarce means of transport to the cities? Renato found the solution. The members of the folklore ballet group would wait for a launch in Dalcahue, which would set sail for Calen in the morning, on a trip that took no longer than two hours. This large group thus embarked at Dalcahue and set out to cross this inner sea, unaware of the fact the climate can be unpredictable: they were subjected to several strong downpours, an extremely ferocious wind, and bone-chilling cold. Yet they made it. Along with them, by another route, came a group of backpackers who Cárdenas had no alternative but to accommodate in a tiny outhouse close to the house.

Gone were the dreams of a peaceful weekend with Renato Cárdenas, by the fireplace, spinning yarns and myths of demonic beings, listening with alert ears to his experiences, his inexhaustible knowledge of botany, deferred due to the presence of twenty-five people who had to spread out their sleeping bags to spend the night in relative comfort. All he was able to explain to me that busy weekend, while he was holding some rare herbs in his hands, was that these were *quiaca* (*claudi bella paniculata*), used by the Chonos as putty to build their boats, or *dalcas*, and that they have been found to be extremely effective in combating diabetes.

The first day I woke up in Calen, before the larger assembly had arrived, I headed for the lonely beach: it was a Sunday and the locals were asleep at that early hour. Despite the dense clouds, I could just make out Achao in the distance, providing me with visual delight and, on a more mundane plane, the chance to use my cell phone, for the antenna in the area meant there was no interference. It was my birthday and the first call I got was from one of my daughters who was abroad. The second was from Teresa Vera, from the El Antiguo Chalet, in Chonchi. Actually, she had not called to wish me many returns.

“Are you alright?” she asked.-

There was anxiety in her voice.

“Yes, fine,” I answered.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” she insisted.

“Walking along the beach, alone and happy.”

I heard her heave a sigh of relief, as though ridding herself of some tragic presage.

“You can’t imagine how pleased I am to hear that. I thought they would have been the death of you.”

“Who?” I asked, perplexed.

“Oh, I don’t know; all those people you went to Calen with.

This inexplicable delirium most probably made sense to Teresa Vera, brought up in a school of French nuns in Santiago. She probably imagined, mayhap influenced by some nineteenth century novel of doubtful and exacerbated naturalism that would have made even Emile Zola pale, that liquor abounded like water, that the women were the native version of Circe, that music and dance were capable of releasing the most unbridled passions. How could I tell her I had never stayed with such a peaceful group, where there was even a young couple with their baby girl?

It would be unfair to say that during that brief weekend Renato Cárdenas did not reveal anything of his vast knowledge, his talent for recounting history, with his own personal touch in describing, developing and reaching the climax of the story. It was at sundown the day before the horde arrived when Renato and a chosen few set off

along the grey, pebbly beach towards Tenaun. Not too far away is the Tocoihue marsh, little more than a tiny cove imprisoned between sharp hills and cliffs once molded by glaciers. One of Cárdenas distinguishing features is that, wherever he may be in Chiloé, he will always have a novel story of his own about the place, displayed with the dexterity of a conjurer producing a rabbit from his hat. But what story could he have to tell about that tiny cove? Perhaps some deity from Chiloé mythology had left their mark, or a pirate hidden his treasure. Renato – in his customary overcoat, scarf and beret – told us that there was a cascade beyond the marsh, the Tocoihue Fall, which could regrettably not be visited that day because of the distance and the fact that nightfall was close at hand. But we could become acquainted with it, through him. And, like those characters I saw stationed on a hill at the doors into the Medina of Fez, who tell stories to large groups of listeners from the remoter areas of Morocco, he told us on that first starry night with an incipient moon, the incredible story of the Tocoihue fall.

In the style of certain theatrical genres, it starts with a woman, a woman with a profoundly contradictory personality, powerful and, naturally, moneyed. The ideal character for a playwright, uncommon in Chiloé in the late 1930's and, even less, in Tenaun, which was little more than a hamlet, despite having one of the most beautiful churches on the island, a three-turreted, blue-painted work of art. But doña Ana Werner de Bahamonde – for this was her name – was not only the proprietor of the loveliest house in the region, but was also passionately interested in politics and, in characteristic splendor, welcomed politicians and even government leaders in her magnificent home. It is thus not surprising she should be decidedly inclined towards progress, for she had clearly liberal leanings. What better, then, than to show the conservatives what she was capable of doing? Tenaun had no electricity, and lacked any powerhouse to provide permanent energy; however, in 1943 it was discovered that a cascade, the Tocoihue Fall, only a few kilometers away, could generate hydroelectric energy if the right surveys and works were carried out on it.

What a gift for Tenaun! What an example to the natives of Chiloé! She would, of course, ensure the whole of Chile heard about it. Relentlessly she hired technicians who promptly gave their verdict. Yes, the fall could generate hydroelectric energy. But this would require carrying out surveys to determine precisely the flow of water during each of the four seasons. Someone would have to undertake that task. Doña Ana, used to taking decisions and solving problems, bought a notebook and pencil, and set off for the home of a neighbor who lived near the fall. She asked her to do the job. All she had to do was to register the value indicated on a meter, and write that figure down in a notebook. It didn't even have to be done every day, just a few times a year. Tenaun would have electricity in just twelve months, once the survey had been completed. Who could refuse to make a contribution that would cost them nothing? The neighbor, obviously, agreed.

However doña Ana, for some reason involving politics, lost interest in this revolutionary initiative, and the project soon fell into oblivion. In time, electricity eventually came to Tenaun, but not from the Tocoihue fall, but from a national supply system. In the 1980s, the underground cable transporting electricity across the Chacao channel was suddenly cut, and darkness overcame Chiloé. Technicians invaded the island in search of alternative sources of energy, and found a cascade known as the Tocoihue falls, close to a hamlet by the name of – obviously, Tenaun, and which would be just right for building a small hydroelectric power plant. Off they went one day, loaded down with sophisticated apparatus to measure the flow of the waters.



As they started on the job, an old, old lady appeared on the spot, a kerchief on her head, and in her hand a visibly old notebook and a pencil that had been sharpened so many times it was now little more than a stub.

“At last you’re here! I’ve been waiting for you for forty years,” the elderly dame exclaimed. “Look, in 1943 doña Ana Werner de Bahamonde left me this notebook to take down some figures. Well, here they are.”

The notes almost overflowed the pages.

“Gentlemen, you’ve taken a weight off my back.”

With that she left, after placing in the hands of these perplexed engineers, the notes she had kept for over more than four decades. As an afterthought, she suddenly turned back, as though she had forgotten something important. “

And now, gentlemen, I hope we have electricity once and for all,” she concluded.

The rest of that summer I saw very little of Renato Cárdenas. He spent part of his time in Santiago, with his current wife, an actress who was about to present a new play. I enjoyed his company only fleetingly in Chonchi, where he turned up unexpectedly once at Rosa Pérez Pinto’s. But perhaps his presence was no longer entirely necessary. He had extended the hand of friendship, and not only revealed the beliefs of the *Chilotes* and some of the absurdist of stories, but had also taught me to decipher clues to other situations and characters I was to meet on the island. He never conditioned me with his opinions to expect something of anybody or of any group, preferring instead to let me reach my own conclusions.

This may have been one his best attitudes.

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# CONQUERING THE VERY ENDS OF THE EARTH

The South American wars for independence during the early nineteenth century raised a variety of wide-ranging problems for these incipient republics once they no longer belonged to Spain: caudillos, anarchy, banditry and abuse, economic crises, interference from foreign powers. Added to this string of ills, so typical of inchoate countries with no democratic culture and prone to investing authority in single personalities, was that of territories hitherto unconquered, as happened in Chile. The remotest southern confines had been explored by Spanish, British and Dutch mariners. Suffice it to say that the most accurate nautical charts for the Strait of Magellan, for instance, had been drawn up by Captain Robert Fitzroy (who skippered the *Beagle* on Charles Darwin's journey to these lands) and were used until late nineteenth century. The government in Santiago, concerned about bringing some order to the prevailing chaos, provided little attention to all the lands south of Chiloé, let alone the labyrinthine straits. However, President Manuel Bulnes, who came to power in 1841, founded the University of Chile and then went on to provide a final solution to the subject of sovereignty in southern latitudes.

The Strait of Magellan suddenly became a priority, for any vessels sailing east or west had no alternative but to take this narrow pass. One could, of course, have attempted to sail round Cape Horn, but this meant risking the fury of the merciless western winds, or the apocalyptic storms so typical of the area. Dozens of vessels had sunk in the region. Magellan was, then, the safest gateway. Geopolitics and Hispanic inheritance meant that Chile was the country to claim it, but so far there had been no initiatives in this connection. General Bernardo O'Higgins, a key figure in Chilean independence, soon understood the importance of laying claim to the strait. The former Chile strongman, who had retired to Lima for political reasons, was to write to President Bulnes pointing out that if no efforts were made to take possession of the Magellan Strait, other foreign powers, such as France or England, would do so, and even neighboring Argentina might make the attempt. While Chile's 1833 Constitution established the country's southernmost limit at Cape Horn, this was merely symbolical, for little value was given to the claims put forward ever since 1558. Reality was entirely different. The government was not unaware of the steady flow of European mariners intent on charting the area, or the British missionaries peopling the region, or the threat Europe would involve if Magellan were occupied: it was all this that eventually led Chile to decide to take over these lands for good.

But the fledgling Republic of Chile, which had become independent but twenty years earlier, had no Navy, or vessels able to carry forward an enterprise of such magnitude. Truth be told, it had but three vessels: the one-hundred ton frigate *Chile*, entirely inadequate to cope with the southern seas, and two schooners *Colo-Colo* and *Janequeo*, normally engaged in plowing Peruvian waters. Nor did the country's flimsy economic situation allow for building a fleet to set forth for the conquest. Bulnes proved

to be a practical man. Sovereignty over the southern territories would have to be achieved with the State's meager resources. But this not only involved building a vessel but also manning it with a crew initiated into the difficulties of the intricate channels south of the Corcovado Gulf, experienced in the unpredictable storms in the Gulf of Penas and knowledgeable about the countless dangers to be overcome in reaching Magellan by this route.

It was then Chiloé came to his mind, for it might provide the country with a unique opportunity. The island and its people had long been forgotten by the government of Santiago, both because of their insularity and bizarre culture and for not having supported Chile in her struggle for independence, for the islanders would actually have preferred to be subjects of the king of Spain! Here was an abundance of excellent timber, a longstanding sea-going tradition, first-class vessel builders and, most particularly, the vital human element required for a feat of such magnitude. Since time immemorial the Chilotes had been in permanent contact with the sea – not, to be sure, with the vast Pacific Ocean breaking on the shores of Valparaíso, but a jigsaw of rugged islands and endless channels. Sailing was not only an art, it also meant knowing and locating the dangers.

In Ancud, the news filled the dwellers with pride. At long last Chile had remembered them, and chosen them, whatever the circumstances, for this unusual conquest. The mayor of Chiloé, Domingo Espiñeiras, arrived on the island with precise instructions from President Manuel Bulnes. Two vessels were initially built, but they turned out to be too small for the task at hand. It was then decided a schooner would be best – the nautical term was actually a pailebote, a smaller-bodied vessel with a schooner's rigging. The ship, only forty-five feet in length, could carry twenty-seven tons and also boasted four cannon. With this tiny craft, a far cry from the great vessels of its time, they would attempt to raise the Chilean flag on the Strait of Magellan. But the small size of the schooner in no way deterred the Chilotes. It was thus that, in a matter of months, a vessel was built in Ancud, a vessel which was originally to have been named Bulnes, but the Chilean official generously declined the offer and suggested it should be named Ancud after the town where it was built.

Who was to make up the crew? For this did not involve simply traveling as far as the strait, raising a flag, and returning home; the President's plans included establishing a colony to guarantee Chilean sovereignty, and this meant taking suitable dwellers. Firstly Captain Low, an old seafarer and a connoisseur of southern secrets, was tracked down to skipper the vessel, but he had died a year earlier. The next choice was Commander John Williams, an English seaman who had played a role in the wars of independence, and who promptly accepted the appointment; Bernardo Phillippi, a German naturalist and mariner who helped colonize the south of Chile, was also added to the list of expeditionaries. Surprisingly, the crew made up of nineteen men was supplemented with two women, Venancia Elgueta de Aros and Ignacia Leiva de Vidal, the wives of two artillery crewmen. There is no record of how much enthusiasm this initiative aroused, and whether many enlisted, yet one can but imagine what it must have meant back in 1843 to sail those seas in a vessel in no way resembling a frigate in size. All those seamen had was a compass and a sextant, some rudimentary devices for measuring depth, and nautical charts that were usually inaccurate. They were, however, above all endowed with an acute sense of survival and familiarity with the unpredictable, which would likely bewilder seamen in our times, with their radios, their incredibly accurate satellite instruments for navigation, and their motor – to mention only a few of our modern-day technical sophistications. On board this vessel there was

little beyond the bare necessities. The men slept crammed together in hammocks, and the absence of any kind of toilet simply increased the rigors of life at sea.

In mid-nineteenth century the spirit of adventure still lived on, for there were territories to explore, lands to annex, and an inquiring spirit that led to sciences like naturalism reaching their zenith. Every unfamiliar animal or stone unleashed inordinate passions, and naturalists would travel mile upon mile, undergoing all nature of penuries, so in search of a new species. Victorian England was the paradigm of the time. The most unlikely expeditions were embarked on, the wildest of hazards recklessly undertaken, the hottest of debates waged between defenders and detractors of a particular hobbyhorse. It is, then, not surprising that in Ancud the mere fact of engaging in an enterprise like conquering the Strait of Magellan for the motherland should awaken similar passions. In all likelihood, they never even considered the inescapable hazards, not limited simply to navigating dangerous waters and riding out tempests, but also beyond question involving attacks from the indigenous dwellers. These latter were simply a part of the time they were required to live in and were matter-of-factly accepted as another of their realities.

The schooner was to set sail for the Strait on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1843, and the entire town turned out to see it off from the pier; handkerchiefs waved as a sloop gently towed the vessel out into the middle of the bay to await favorable winds. One can but imagine the feelings among the crew as they stood waving their hands in farewell, watching the town and the Lacuy peninsula fade into the background as the schooner plowed its way slowly across the seas, most likely never even imagining the heroic mission they were embarking on. What must have prevailed was a feeling of patriotism, and the irresistible intoxication of quest and adventure. And when on the following day the Ancud unfurled her mainsail, mizzen sail and jibs, and set forth for the Chacao Canal, those nineteen men and two women must have been well nigh ecstatic at taking part in such an endeavor. They doubtless believed that never, since the times of Francisco Pizarro and Pedro de Valdivia, had such a feat been achieved. America was still to be discovered and colonized.

That midday of May 23<sup>rd</sup> the schooner anchored in Dalcabue. There was, however, not a vestige of wind, and the sloop towed her as far as Curaco de Vélez, on the neighboring island of Quinchao, one of the most beautiful in the archipelago. There they picked up Carlos Miller, a man who knew the Strait of Magellan like the palm of his hand, and who was to be their pilot on the voyage. And it was thus that this strikingly mixed crew comprising seamen, a naturalist, soldiers, sailors, a carpenter, Captain Williams' sixteen-year-old son, two plucky women ready for anything, a pair of pigs, a pair of goats, and a hen-run crowded with fowl, put out from Curaco de Vélez. The schooner sailed along the channels guided by church belfries, sighted the islands of Chelín and Quehui and on the last day of May – a mere nutshell tossed about on the ocean waves, guided only by a compass – made her way towards the Corcovado Gulf. The horizon held promise of a *plus ultra*, a land yet to be conquered and peopled.

In the gulf, however, the waters were far from serene. The schooner sailed the open sea, and as she approached the Guaitecas, the waves grew taller, the wind turned ominous and the vessel's hull creaked. Yet the crew were unperturbed, engrossed in their tasks and in their ulterior aim: this was no trading journey, it was a conquest, a supreme act of patriotism. Perhaps Venancia and Ignacia, the two women, stood on deck contemplating the immensity of the Pacific, while the sailors maneuvered the sails and ropes that drove the vessel on towards the unknown. Fate had brought them all together not only on this journey but also for the bright future to be built on the banks of the Magellan Strait, where they were to settle. What a delight to sail on these unsettled

seas, feeling the vessel's prow cleaving the waves! What a difference with the quiet waters of the Chiloé archipelago, where only rarely did one feel the sea foam, the taste of saltwater, the incomparable strength of the wind. Far off, on the horizon were the Guaitecas, the extreme boundary of all civilization.

But the southern sea soon caused the first setback. A wave crashed into one of the sloops, the ropes gave way, and the boat fell into the water. These boats carried on deck, fastened down with thick ropes, were as essential as the vessel itself. Without them, it would be impossible to disembark on lonely lands, or to load food supplies, or even to carry out secondary explorations. Now, one of those precious supports had been washed into the water. How could they turn the vessel in this raging sea? How could they recover the tiny sloop that meant so much to the expedition? There was no alternative but to carry on sailing south as far as a nearby island. There Carlos Miller decided to lower the other sloop and, with a group of oarsmen, set out to sea in search of their lost treasure. However, the immensity of the Pacific, the inordinate currents, the threatening wind, were all too much for them, and it was not long before they had returned, without the sloop. They sailed up the channels to Puerto Americano, where they stayed until they had built another sloop. The nine days they spent there were surprisingly quiet, each of them indulging in things they had never expected to do. Bernardo Phillippi saw the dream of any nineteenth century naturalist come true, exploring a remote island in the southernmost place he had ever been to, analyzing rocks, plants and insects, watching the rare fauna, like Charles Darwin had done a few years earlier on these same islands, and at the same latitude, i.e. 45 degrees south. The men not engaged in building the dinghy hunted seals and sea lions, and collected shellfish at low tide; Ignacia and Venancia, free of the boundaries imposed by the vessel, cooked what nature prodigally provided.

But the idyllic stopover came to an end after nine days, when the *Ancud* weighed anchor and set sail for the Moraleda Channel and unpredictable latitudes, where unimaginable dangers awaited them. Who would have supposed, as they sailed between colossal mountains against one of the most beautiful settings in the world, that the Pacific Ocean could turn into a terrifying monster able to sink many a larger vessel than the modest schooner? The channels, too, involved perils. The *williwaw* – a term derived from the language spoken by the Alacalufe Indians –, the wind that swiftly blew up overpowering gales, was no stranger to these islands. Imagine the force of these winds, that even today they can overturn fifty-foot yachts. The *Beagle*, the brigantine commanded by Captain Fitzroy, and which Darwin traveled on, made its way through those channels towards the end of 1834, that is, nine years earlier. It might be of interest to reproduce the marvelous prose of the British naturalist to understand what these winds were like.

*December 10th, 1834. White massive clouds were piled up against a dark blue sky, and across them black ragged sheets of vapour were rapidly driven. The successive mountain ranges appeared like dim shadows; and the setting sun cast on the woodlands a yellow gleam. The water was white with the flying spray, and the wind lulled and roared again through the rigging: it was an ominous, sublime scene.*

After a few days sailing down the labyrinthine channels around the Guaitecas, an aboriginal word – meaning *guay*, the action of turning; and *theca*, pass or outlet – they made it to the ocean, which was the only pass that would lead them to the Golfo de Penas, which they would have to sail along to get to the Strait of Magellan. Driven by favorable winds, the schooner headed south, but this time in ocean waters. How satisfying it must have been for Captain Williams, Phillippi and the sailors to navigate with crosswinds, the vessel listing at just the right angle, at unbelievable speed, and taking full advantage of the rigging! They didn't even require a sextant to calculate exactly where they were: by simply contemplating the continental cordillera, to port, they could place their position on the map. And when that cordon of mountains came to an end they would know they had reached the Tres Montes Peninsula, which was the entry place to the Penas Gulf. But the Pacific Ocean rarely lives up to its name. The weather started to worsen. Dense southwesterly clouds appeared and the wind and waves swelled threateningly. Yet the schooner Ancud, with minimal rigging, was still in control: she plowed through the waves carried by the wind, fully in charge in one of the loneliest places on the Chilean coast.

Two days later the storm broke.

Remember, for an instant, the size and nautical resources of this vessel now enduring a southern tempest. The *Beagle*, under the able hands of Captain Fitzroy, had withstood major storms in the Magellan area, but this was a heavy brigantine with a crew fully accustomed to ocean crossings. In fact, it went round the world without major difficulties. The Ancud, though suitable for the channels in the archipelago, was clearly inadequate for the gigantic waves in the Pacific. During those desperate maneuvers while the wind howled and the ocean roared dangerously, Captain Williams no doubt wondered whether the expedition was not simply insanity. How were they to carry on in this schooner hardly prepared for emergencies of this nature? Who could they resort to in the event of a shipwreck, if they ever managed to survive? Two days after reaching the Pacific Ocean, on July 28<sup>th</sup>, the storm reached its peak. The waves broke over the vessel with earsplitting force while spars and guys whistled in the wind.

A tempest at sea, on board a minimum tonnage vessel like the Ancud, could turn into a most terrifying experience, particularly for any passengers unacquainted with nautical knowledge. The captain and crew may have felt unafraid. Used to gigantic sea-swells, and raging winds, to waves sweeping across the deck, once the storm had broken they were busy maneuvering, aware that survival depended on them. But the others must have taken refuge inside the vessel so as not to interfere in the maneuvers or be washed overboard. All that was left to them was the tiny inner space, where these terrified passengers would have to cope with seasickness and claustrophobia, the violent shaking of the vessel and the noisy clamor of the punishing waves breaking over the ship. This torment could have lasted for hours and even days. The women and artillery men, ignorant of nautical arts, no doubt cowered in the cabin, clinging to timbers and handrails to avoid being knocked about, struggling not to fall. Inevitably they must have feared the end was nigh, that they would sink forever under these solitary thrashing waters.

Then, disaster struck: a gigantic wave battered the vessel starboard, opening a three-meter crack in her hull. Water poured in, flooding the hold where supplies were stored. It is at these times, perhaps, when driven by the spirit of survival, subjected to

absolutely extreme situations, that people are somehow able to fall back on inhuman strength, and unsuspected courage. There are no records of those moments of panic and resolution. But it is reasonable to suppose they were all, even the women, bailing out water with buckets, containers and pumps, while the schooner struggled to keep afloat. The wave, they discovered to their horror, had also damaged the helm and put it out of action. These must have been desperate, heart-rending times, as the vessel surrendered control to the storm. But Captain Williams, a resourceful man of the sea, showed guts, fighting spirit, and the sheer will to survive; in the midst of pandemonium he improvised a helm that would keep the Ancud on course. Seamanship is, ultimately, the art of improvisation. He realized that, in these conditions, the only alternative was to find a port of refuge. But where? In that immenseness, they would have to cover hundreds of miles to find shelter in a cove. How could they approach that mountainous coast lashed by the sea to search for a port. Any seaman knows that the worst danger is a threatening coast leeward. If they tried it the Ancud might end up shattered against the rocks.

They had to get back to Puerto Americano, whatever the cost. If they could take refuge once again in the channels, they would be safe. Williams knew that only a timely, bold maneuver would avoid a catastrophe. He gave his crew their orders, and with the expertise and good fortune some seamen seem to have, he managed to get the schooner to make a 180-degree turn, and sail back the way she had come. Fate thus intervened, *Deus ex machina*, to save the vessel from shipwreck, contributing to this handful of brave-hearts later conquering the Strait of Magellan for Chile. Hard though it may be to believe it, this was due to another wave buffeting the Ancud on her port side, which stopped the water from flooding in.

In this condition, her crew practically exhausted, the Chiloé schooner limped north in the hope of reaching Puerto Americano, where they could stay until the repairs were completed. Providence smiled on the small group, and only a few days later they had found the channel refuge they sought. No more pounding waves, or battering winds: just quiet waters, caught between the mountains, where they could sail without fear. Some days later they had made it to Puerto Americano. The first thing Captain Williams discovered, once able to see the entire hull of the vessel, was that it was impossible to repair it there, for this remote spot could not provide the materials required for the job. With timber from the dense forest he built a shelter for his crew; a campfire in the center had the twofold task of keeping them warm and providing the means for cooking shellfish and any animals they might catch.

But there was yet another decision to be taken.

The expedition had not failed, but it ran the severe risk of being frustrated. Somehow, no matter the cost, they had to get the materials to repair the hull and the helm. How could they ever return to Chiloé with empty hands and without having conquered the Magellan Strait? How could they tell Domingo Espiñeiras, mayor of Chiloé, that he would have to wait for his heart's desire, for what President Manuel Bulnes himself had ordered? The Captain simply could not give up just like that. There was one possibility – probably the only one – which might mean this mission had not been in vain. They would have to return to Ancud and bring back the materials they required in a barge. Here Williams showed his metal, proving to have a stature comparable to that of the great conquistadores. Francisco Pizarro and Hernan Cortes did not conquer Peru and Mexico simply by chance, but by their firm resolve, a spirit of iron when taking decisions and resorting even to cruelty if needs be. *Fortuna audaces juvat.*

Williams decided one of the sloops would row back to Chiloé in search of vital help.

At sundown on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1843, in freezing mid-winter weather and with the southern wind lashing their faces, pilot Carlos Miller, naturalist Bernardo Phillippi and four oarsmen set off from Puerto Americano to row across the one hundred and sixty six nautical miles that separated them from their destination, with nothing more than the strength of their arms, a little stale bread that had survived the storm and the flooded hold, and a container of fresh water.

For five days and nights these men rowed ceaselessly, tirelessly, fearlessly – for nothing could stop them. They rowed up the Moraleda Channel which is not exactly a fjord but rather a very wide pass, with currents and tempests, and eventually reached the Corcovado Gulf. The foothills of the Pirulil cordillera, just visible on the horizon, must have spurred them on, if anything could actually have made them doubt their capacity or their purpose. The rashest of enterprises tend to be the most successful. Who could ever have imagined that, at the time of the mutiny on the *HMS Bounty* in the South Pacific, in April 1789, the historically loathed captain William Bligh and eighteen crew members, placed by the renegade Fletcher Christian in a seven-meter sloop in the middle of the ocean, would sail for forty seven days, covering 3,618 nautical miles, from Tofua to Timor, with the aid of only a single sail? Bligh survived first and foremost because he was an exceptional seaman (any other, without his experience, would probably not have managed it), and what kept him going was the fact that one of the fundamental rules of the sea had been broken: his crew had mutinied; his pride had been sorely hurt and he would live to pursue the mutineers.

Miller, Phillippi and the four oarsmen survived because the President of Chile – and hence, Chileans in general – wanted the Strait of Magellan. If the strait were not conquered and colonized it would fall into the hands of foreign powers, though at the time this did not include Argentina, for in that year 1843 the dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas was more concerned about resolving the Anglo-French blockade on the Rio de la Plata than about conquering Patagonia. Carlos Miller – like Bligh – was a man of the sea, and had profound knowledge of the channels and the dangers in the Corcovado Gulf. What would they have done if a gale had suddenly struck them? How would they have resisted the fearsome waves? Miller knew that, if they kept close to the Chiloé coast, they would be safe: the channels and fjords were ideal places for sailing, and if necessary, for seeking shelter. But it was not enough simply to be an outstanding mariner. They had to be made of the stuff of heroes. And those six men undoubtedly were. Not once did they waver, or complain of being tired, or hungry, or thirsty. The only thing that mattered was to make the *Chilote* coast as fast as possible.

Obviously, they made it, for the goddess of fortune smiled on them. They reached Dalcahue, the place they had set off from two months earlier, and immediately devoted themselves to the task of getting together the materials required to repair the schooner, which, of course, were unavailable in that small harbor. They would have to go to Ancud. Bernardo Phillippi decided to make the journey on horseback to save time. Thus they would avoid having to row up the channels and into the Chacao channel, with its fearsome currents. But the path did not traverse gentle plains, or grassy hills, but impenetrable forests, with appallingly damp, muddy soil and logs laid across the trail so the horses would not sink into the mire. Nor did Phillippi know the way. Yet none of this could daunt him. He set off due northeast, and somehow, though a neophyte, managed to get across the dense woodland. His indomitable spirit, his tenaciousness in achieving his goal, in overcoming any obstacles, led him on towards the ancient Spanish town.



Imagine for a moment this Prussian-born mariner who had chosen Chile as his country – where he would die, years later, in the Magellan boundaries far south – making his way through an impossibly thick forest, racing against time, disregarding the botanical and zoological temptations the woods must have set before his botanist's eyes, concerned only with reaching Ancud as soon as he could, for to some extent the conquest of the Strait of Magellan depended on him. It is paradoxical that an enterprise of such magnitude should have rested in the hands of just one man. What would have happened if he had been injured? The clock would have ticked against the schooner, and as will be seen later, it was just by a day, no more than twenty-four hours, that the strait did not fall into the hands of the French.

The Prussian, a man structured on the basis of German thought, eventually got to Ancud.

Yet he did not receive a hero's welcome. The mayor of Chiloé, Domingo Espiñeiras, was not amused! The misadventures of the schooner crew were of little interest to him, nor was he moved at all by Phillippi's solitary horseback ride. President Bulnes had expressly placed him in his position with the mission of building in Ancud a schooner able to reach the Strait of Magellan, which was a clearly political objective for the government. Chilean sovereignty in that southern region was crucial, and now, because of an arguably inexperienced crew, the entire plan was jeopardized. Even his own office could be brought into question. Espiñeiras may have been torn between rage, powerlessness, fear of reprisals, uncertainty about his political career, the inefficiency of his administration, but, the fact was, no good would come of his blaming the mariners.

Phillippi handed him a letter written by captain Williams, where he gave an account of the misfortunes undergone in the Pacific Ocean, and of the way their lives had been miraculously saved. How could this group of braves be wrongly judged? Had not even Phillippi set off on horseback to Ancud, paying no heed to the dangers on the road, in an effort to make up for lost time. How could one be insensitive to the valor they had displayed even risking their own lives? What had happened was undoubtedly *force majeure*. To some extent mollified, the Mayor decided to stake his future once again on the conquest of the strait: he solved the problem of the materials required for repairing the vessel and put a manned barge at their disposal to transport everything to Puerto Americano.

There an anxious Williams awaited, still unaware whether the long journey to Chiloé in the sloop had been a success. Phillippi returned, as he had promised, with all the elements Williams had requested. All of which leads one to ponder on the fact that Europeans who undertook incredible adventures in South America in the nineteenth century were endowed with an indomitable spirit, an iron will, and an uncommon heroism. Within a short time, the schooner Ancud had been repaired, loaded with supplies and fresh water, and was once again ready to set sail for the unknown, with the same crew members. It was then Williams, rightfully included among the founding fathers of the Chilean nation, showed another of his facets. Though English-born, Chile was his country of adoption, and he was willing to go to any extreme to complete his mission. However, he was aware that the task at hand did not simply involve conquering and colonizing the Strait of Magellan, but also defending Chilean sovereignty in the southern channels. The presence of the brigantine *Enterprise*, under the United States flag, in Puerto Americano, almost caused an incident. Two timber sloops from Chiloé attempted to barter goods with the foreign vessel, wishing to exchange nutria furs –*huillín*, in Huilliche language – and chungungo for tobacco. Such an exchange went against the legal rulings in force, so Williams made the brigantine

captain set sail, pointing out the vessel was not only required to leave the harbor but also the channels.

Imagine the perplexity of the American captain at receiving that order. He must have taken one look at the modest fifteen-meter Ancud schooner, belonging to a country which did not even have a Navy of its own, and must have thought his Chilean counterpart had suffered a sudden attack of madness. How could the commander of that vessel dare to impart orders to the captain of a brigantine belonging to none other than the United States? Not only did he refuse to obey the order, but insolently ignored it: that same evening he decreed that two sloops should go out at first light to catch *huillines* and other local fauna. No seaman from a would-be South American republic was going to tell him – much less *order* him – what to do. He was, of course, unaware of who Commander John Williams was, or of what he was doing in these faraway channels. When Williams found his orders had not been obeyed, he sent a group of gunners to capture the sloops, and informed the commander of the *Enterprise* that they would be returned when his vessel set sail.

For the American, this was the acme of bravado. Why should he obey an insignificant mariner in the service of Chile, who was attempting to restrict his trade? Who did the modest crewmen on a coarse boat think they were to put pressure on him? He would simply ignore the order. Pretend they did not exist. But Williams had not come this far south or withstood the tempest in vain. If this meant reaffirming Chilean sovereignty in the channels, it was best to get it over with. He gave the order to the artillerymen to prime a cannon – Ancud had four of them – and aim at the brigantine. The American rather tardily understood that his opponent would impose his authority at any price. Without more ado he weighed anchor and left Puerto Americano behind forever.

On September 9<sup>th</sup> Captain Williams too weighed anchor, but with another, more ambitious, destination in view: to reach the Strait of Magellan and take possession of it. The schooner Ancud had been repaired and sailed easily into the Penas Gulf, where they found the waters surprisingly peaceful. The vessel plowed gallantly across the gulf and into the broad channel leading to the long-awaited strait. This moment must have meant great joy to the crew whose mission had been put off for so long, while they were forced to live on the islands in unstable lean-tos, and living off hunting and fishing. Now all they had to do was get to the right place, slipping up a channel boxed in between deserted mountains. However, in sailing, one can never be sure all dangers have been overcome. The first to arise, apparently out of nowhere, was a party of Alacalufe Indians.

This nomad tribe that had peopled the southern channels since times immemorial, lived in their canoes, going from place to place in search of food and fleeing before the winds. And they were not exactly friendly. When they caught sight of the schooner they rowed crazily after it, in an effort to catch up with it – which they were fortunately unable to do. But the crew must have been terrified, particularly Ignacia and Venancia who, in addition to having undergone so many deprivations were now faced with the threat of having to cope with savage Indians, their faces painted black, and letting out strident screeches. But the Ancud had been designed to sail along channels and the Indians were unable to catch up with her.

In earlier chapters I have mentioned the devastating effects of the *williwaw*, a wind in the southern channels that descends with unusual strength from the glaciers and

which, if trapped in the coves, can smash a vessel to pieces. We cannot be sure of whether the schooner had to confront this kind of nautical predator, but she was, in fact, punished by fearsome winds and on more than one occasion ran the risk of sinking. During those harsh, unduly long, moments, how far away the Strait of Magellan must have seemed to them. Was it perhaps possessed by that rare enchantment of Las Encantadas – the islands now known as Galapagos – where mariners were only able to land with the worst of tribulations? The swirling currents seemed to make it impossible to reach them. Magellan was right there, ahead of them. On the nautical maps the route could clearly be traced. But there was always something that seemed to be keeping them away, be it the tempest, the Indians, the raging winds.

At last the day came when they sailed into the Strait. Due north, in the direction they had come from, were the Group of Evangelists – named thus for the gospel-writers – four rugged rocks in the middle of the sea, and fearsome to sailors for they are close to the western inlet of the strait. Nowadays, there is a lighthouse to guide the way. Due south was the extremely dangerous Cape Froward, the southernmost point on the South American continent, with treacherous currents and tempests which had shipwrecked numerous vessels. Four months had gone by since they sailed from Ancud. Four months of hardship, storms that might have been the death of them, heroic decisions, but they were finally there. Their emotion must have been indescribable, comparable to the immensity of the landscape. Nineteen men and two women, on a tiny vessel barely able to withstand those high seas, were to provide Chile with one of the most strategic passes in the world.

On September 21<sup>st</sup>, the first day of spring in these southern lands, the Ancud crew eventually set foot on dry land at Punta Santa Ana, raised the Chilean flag, drew up the Charter of Possession and founded Puerto Bulnes, in homage to the president who had encouraged the colonizing initiative. The Magellan Strait now belonged to Chile. The Ancud, *comme il faut*, fired a twenty-one cannon-shot salvo.

Though at the very ends of the earth, our travelers were soon to discover that anything could happen in these latitudes. A full day had not elapsed since the schooner Ancud anchored at her destination and her crew had started on the first stages of settling in, when suddenly, out of the blue, emerged a vessel of enormous proportions – particularly when compared with the tiny Chilean boat. The craft was not only considerably well rigged, but made her way under her own steam. It was the *Phaeton*, a French war corvette, another vessel making its way around what hitherto had been a no man's land, and was still so in the mind of the Europeans. However, a radical change had taken place the previous day – a change that would forever seal Chilean sovereignty over the Strait of Magellan: a tiny ship and her crew had taken possession of “no man's land” and it now belonged to Chile. The French vessel anchored alongside the schooner Ancud – the comparison must have been well nigh overwhelming –, some small talk was exchanged between the captains, and things apparently followed their usual diplomatic course.

Yet peace was not to last. The Sunday following her arrival, the *Phaeton* commander decided, in a not uncommon move, to celebrate mass on land, for there was a bishop on board his vessel. The problem was that the French flag was raised during the event, an attitude that upset captain Williams. In consideration of the ceremony being performed, he held his peace. But the following day the French once again raised their standard, for no reason in particular, as though the land actually belonged to them. Their boldness brought an end to Williams' patience. The situation could hardly have been more of a paradox. The schooner's crew, after four months of hardship and uncertainties, on board a flimsy vessel, had taken possession of the Strait of Magellan in

the name of Chile and, hardly a day later, a more than respectably sized French corvette was apparently attempting to snatch from them the land they had struggled so hard to conquer. Williams sent a polite note to the French commander pointing out that they objected to having the tricolor fluttering over this land without the appropriate authorization. After several exchanges, the *Phaeton* eventually weighed anchor and left the terrain in the hands of this valiant crew. Needless to say, in France the attitude of the French captain was viewed with disdain.

But this put an end to European pretensions over the Strait of Magellan.

The scenario was far from welcoming, though. A sterile land, where little or nothing grew, where the sole survivors were the Alacalufe and the Yaghan Indians, who since time immemorial had dwelled in these rigorous regions. The Ancud party did not belong to that culture. While the Chilotes were part of the Huilliche ethnic background, their cultural system could hardly have been more different from that of these savages. They had nothing in common with these Magellan nomads, who roamed these expanses naked despite the crude weather, their skin daubed with sea-lion grease. Nor were these wild savages easy to civilize, as those in Chiloé had been. Suffice it to remember the virtually tragic turn of events on the return of the Tierra del Fuego Indians captain Fitzroy had carried off to England, on the *Beagle's* first journey, and who were once again deposited in Tierra del Fuego on his second visit, when he traveled south with Charles Darwin. Jemmy Button, York Minster and Fueguia were the best example of the hopelessness of civilizing this indomitable race: after three years of living in England, of having been educated to European cultural customs, of being fashionably dressed, learning English, and being received by the Queen of England herself, as Fueguia was, no sooner had they disembarked they became once again the save primeval savages. It is not surprising, therefore, that the diverse Magellan Indian races eventually died out.

This was the scenario encountered by Venancia and Ignacia, the gunners and those other crewmen who were to become the first settlers in Fuerte Bulnes. The mere sight of this uncongenial, freezing land, swept by the Magellan winds, must have been bleak, to say the least. Even so, it was not long before they had applied themselves to the task of building the first Chilean settlement in the region.

Heroic exploits, however, often have unexpected sequels. Perhaps the settlers were unable to blot out the memory of those who came before them, who had left Spain in September 1581, on five vessels, confident the New World would provide them with the Horn of Abundance, under the orders of admiral Sarmiento de Gamboa. This travel book is not the right place to tell of the hardship, privation, hunger, death, killings and diseases the first colonists underwent. I will go no further than to say that by the time the English mariner Thomas Cavendish got there, the colony had turned into an appalling place of dread. There were three bodies still hanging on the scaffold, and others scattered on the ground. The remainder, women and children among them, had starved to death. A single survivor, Tomé Hernández, emerged from the woods and gave the English corsair a gruesome account of the horrors they had suffered. Cavendish renamed the place Puerto Hambre, or Port Famine.

It was not far from here the Ancud schooner crew had raised their flag. This account must have pursued them implacably as the months went by. But they doggedly refused to succumb.

In November 1843, after completing his mission, Captain Williams returned with the schooner to Chiloé, where their adventure had started. The journey was no less hard. It is interesting to read what was written in the vessel's log book, to have some insight into who these seamen were, these people who with nothing much more than a compass

plowed their way across the most dangerous seas in the world to conquer uninhabited lands.

*November 30. Stiff wind holding, clear sky, strong swell. At 2.30 the schooner was struck hard by two waves on the portside, water filled one of the sloops and a considerable torrent washed in the largest hatchway.*

*At 5 A.M. we sighted Cape Tres Montes to the east. Water was pouring into the vessel. At 6 A.M. we were confronted by Cape Raper NNE, 14 miles away. At that time it was found that the earlier buffeting had broken a portside plank close to the main rigging, about 12 feet long. A thin board was placed over it with a tarred tarpaulin, which avoided the water pouring in, but the weight of the two sloops and thirty-one people on board with all their belongings was hard work for the schooner.*

*At 7 A.M. the tide was terribly strong, with tidal currents and a stiff south wind, which at times made us fear for the vessel. During one of these strong groundswells, the poop-end sloop was washed away. The seas were so high that the towropes on the other didn't work, and I had to force the sail to keep up with the waves, for each one seemed about to fall on us.*

*At midday we came upon Pringle Point about 12 miles east. At that time the second sloop filled with water and overturned, but it soon turned right side up again and carried on towing well, despite being full of water. At 5.30 P.M. we sighted Cape Taitao about 14 miles east when a large wave broke the sloop's towrope and thus we lost both our sloops. At 7 P.M. we sighted Tenquhuen Island or Cape Grande, about 7 miles away. The seas in this part were terribly choppy because of the strong breaking surf.*

*I navigated along the Darwin channel; because of the high seas I had to turn the vessel several times to take it on the poop side. I passed by the channel mouth and was forced to carry on NWW. Until midnight the sea and wind were the same, the land shrouded in fog prevented us from seeing the coastline.*

As will be seen later, it was not simply a question of reaching the Strait of Magellan, but also of getting back to Chiloé. Little is known about that return trip, but it was no less appalling than the outgoing passage, and once again the lives of captain Williams and his crew – with a few others who decided to throw in their lot with them – were at stake.

Latin American peoples are wont to have bad memories, at least with regard to some historical facts. The schooner Ancud took part in an epic adventure that should have merited her being displayed in some Chilean museum. But her fate was to be another. Three years after returning to Chiloé, the vessel that had conquered the Strait of Magellan for Chile, that had survived the “Gulf of Sorrows” or Penas Gulf, that had been on the point of firing against a brigantine under North American flag to defend Chilean sovereignty, and that had stood its ground against an imposing French corvette, was dismantled. The hull was sold for a meager 503 pesos. Nor can reproach be voiced in this connection, for it is only time that provides some exploits with perspective. Assuredly, none of the crewmen on the Ancud ever thought they would go down in history, or that their voyage would be looked back on as a unique, unrepeatable achievement. To them, it was simply another expedition, but it was not heroism that led the way. Memory is jogged when Port Williams appears on a map of the Beagle Channel, or on finding a street by the name of Phillippi. The replica of the schooner,

once on show in Ancud, probably in the very place where she was built, now no longer exists. Nor was it ever rebuilt.

From 1843, the year in which they arrived in what was to become Fort Bulnes, till 1849, the Chilote colonists stayed on, suffering any amount of plagues and epidemics. The loneliness, the cold, the difficulties in procuring food must have been distressing, yet none of them sought to return. In 1846 the government in Santiago appointed Colonel José Santos Mardones as governor of Magellan, yet this did not lead to any improvement in their living conditions. Six years later it was decided the populace should be transferred east.

This was where Punta Arenas was founded, the city which in years to come was to manage Patagonian economy. Until the inauguration of the Panama Canal in 1914, the Strait of Magellan was the unavoidable route for any vessel. This led to the emergence of the large landowners, with properties amounting to millions of acres, of gigantic *estancias* inhabited only by sheep, of sailing companies in the hands of no more than five families. It also encouraged the building of dazzling French palaces, still to be seen in Punta Arenas as museums or hotels. But Magellan was also a land of adventurers, of anarchists, of revolutionaries, of Indian hunters and of shady deals.

Yet, adventure has tinged its history; and the first of its milestones was placed by a vessel – unpretentious to say the least – the schooner Ancud, at the time she anchored opposite the coasts of Magellan, raised the Chilean flag and launched a salvo of twenty-one cannon shot.

\* \* \*

## THREE GRACES IN MANAO

The northern coast of Chiloé, in other words, the coast closest to the Chacao channel, lacks the grandeur abounding in other parts of the island. No fjords, or cordillera in this flat landscape, surrounded by gently sloping hills, under the brooding omnipresence of the sea, stretching off towards the Chilean continent, without even a vestige of an island. The advantage for those who live there is its proximity to Chacao: thirty minutes across the channel, and half an hour to Puerto Montt. But it is still Chiloé terrain, precisely because the power of that geography lives on. It always surprises me there are people who actually choose this area to live in, or to spend the best part of the year. It is understandable that someone should flee the cold in the north of the United States and take refuge in Florida or California; or that an Englishman, weary of fog and dreariness should seek in the Mediterranean a more benevolent clime, where the sun shines even in winter. What is to me utterly baffling, though, is that three Chilean women, who were not even born in Chiloé, nor have any ancestral bond with this land, should have chosen this isolation, this rigorous climate, these graveled roads as their place of residence, albeit temporarily.

Yet my bewilderment is, in fact, only superficial. There were powerful reasons leading to their decision, a different reason in each case. Nor are any of them like either of the others. Yet, all three have something in common: they have chosen to live in Manao. It should be noted, to do them justice, and to some extent vindicate the landscape, that this region is lavishly endowed with beaches, hardly what one might define an aesthetic pleasure, for the freezing temperatures make any attempt at bathing virtually impossible. But the vast horizon provides a feeling of freedom, entirely different from the constraints of the fjords, locked between the sea and the mountains. In Castro, or in other places in Chiloé, few people know of the existence of these three women, perchance because they were not born there, and do not bear surnames like Vera, Álvarez or Bahamonde – to mention just a few traditional family names – but, basically, because they are *afuerinas*, or outsiders, which not only means they were not born there but that they do not fit in with island culture.

No sooner do passengers disembark from the ferry in Chacao a gravel pathway leads them off to Pulelo, a township which, as so often happens in these regions, is not a tidily laid out village with a few houses, a plaza and a church, but a handful of peasant homes scattered around the hillside. Which, of course, means it is easier to find a needle in a haystack than pinpoint someone's whereabouts. This ghost town is only four kilometers from Chacao, and the road leading to it runs alongside the sea: the only signs of life are provided by a gate here and there, concealed among thicket hedges. One of these gates – painted a strident blue – points the way to the home of Inés Purcell, the only one of these three women who lives the whole year round in Chiloé. It was no easy task to find her home, and as usually happens on the island, inquiring of the locals simply confuses the matter. However, an apparently well-informed man gave me a clue: there was a windmill at the gate in the shape of a small plane with a rotating

propeller. I did, indeed, discover the tiny aircraft that had kept the streamlined shape typical of comic strips and money boxes in the 1940s.

It is on occasion odd the way prejudice can take on the most fantastic of forms. I had forged an image of this lady based on remarks by people who knew her, subjective to say the least. They considered her – ironically enough – the island version of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and little less than a survivor of Chiloé rigors. It is not difficult to imagine, then, a tall, fair, slender woman – like an illustrated religious text kept in a missal book – romantically roaming the beach and providing aid for the peasants. A sort of *afuerina* Pincoya. When she came out to greet me, escorted by an enormous Alsatian, what I actually saw, instead, was a robust woman no longer young, clad in jeans, with graying hair.

Her house was tiny, but exquisite. It was not the result of money easily earned and easily spent; it had been built with colossal effort, so often the sequel of desperate situations. This woman proudly showing me round her timber dwelling, with bright, visually perfect interiors, the requisite books lining her bookshelves, and the garden unfolding all the way down to the desolate beach, had one day resolved to go and live on this remote island, so utterly different from anything she had ever known.

“Seattle is so, so far away,” she reflected.

And not only geographically. She brewed coffee and then ensconced herself comfortably in her favorite armchair, from where she could dominate the sea, stretching as far as the eye could see into nothingness, with the Chilean continent far, far away on the horizon, where the view of the volcanoes was blurred by the haze on this wonderfully sunny day. While we sat there and chatted she told me she had been born and studied in Viña del Mar, on the Chilean shores of the Pacific, and had lived seventeen years in Seattle. It was, in fact, simply a linear account, as though she were tracing the course of her life characterized by vague existential cycles. But I was able to gather that during that lengthy period abroad she lived with her husband and children and worked as surgeon’s aide in an American hospital. This meant blending in with the American way of life, which could not have been easy for her, what with the green card, the bank accounts, their savings, taxes paid punctually in April, the mortgage on their home, the schedules, in short a rigidly structured system nobody could escape from. Not to mention their social relationships, whether friends from work, or Chileans living in the same city.

Yet one day it all came to an end. Inés talks of it matter-of-factly, pointedly removing anything resembling emotion, and providing few details about what was in all likelihood the most dramatic time in her life. It was then the unexpected, the apparently contradictory, occurred. Just as one might be struck dumb at hearing of a professionally active lady, involved in a quasi-perfect system suddenly deciding to go off to live in Bhutan, the behavior of Inés Purcell is no less surprising.

She made up her mind to go and live in Chiloé.

Her move to the these antipodean southern confines was to all appearances due to a Chilean, Lucho Koch – a man with whom her relationship was on a strictly friendly standing – who owned a thousand-hectare estate in Hueldén, close to Manao, and who spent part of each year in Seattle.

“He suggested I should go and live there, manage his house for him, and change my lifestyle,” Inés Purcell explained.

She is loath to speak of the reason for such a drastic change. A detonating factor may have been the turbulent end to her marriage and her subsequent divorce; yet, who would leave a secure position as a surgeon’s aide, the safety of the American system, a home where everything went like clockwork, a car that could be changed every two



years, to go off and live in remote a fishing harbor in the southernmost domains of Chile, in a region she was not even acquainted with. What bound her to Koch was friendship and not romance. It was, I suspect, a veritable existential crisis that led her to these latitudes, perhaps to some extent connected with financial or personal reasons we can but guess at. The years she had spent in Chiloé, the isolation, the primal relationship with the peasants in the region had made her particularly reserved.

“So it was I came to live here,” she said. “I lived for two years in Lucho’s house in Hueldén. We had made a sort of pact: I took care of the housekeeping, particularly during those interminable winter months when it never stops raining, and whenever he came, that is, when he wasn’t in the States, he would find a warm, well-kept home. It was a shame that after two years problems started to crop up.

Lucho Koch was a landed estate owner with his thousand hectares in Hueldén, the northern tip of the island. For an economic system where rural plots cover two or three hectares, his could almost be considered a small empire. She gave me no inkling of the profitability of this large expanse of land, which could have provided fodder for a significant amount of cattle. But the fact he appeared in the real estate ownership registry with such a large number of hectares inherited from his family placed him far above the rest of the mortals inhabiting Chiloé. Hueldén was little more than a hamlet for fishermen, but for the landowner it held strong links with his childhood, summers spent by the sea, a kind of paradise lost. Yet his nostalgia was short-lived. One day he brought home a friend, and daily life began to show the strains of “three’s a crowd”. Inés felt to some extent supplanted by this new dweller in their midst, listening to his sightseeing projects to the detriment of the peaceable life they normally lived. Feeling she was no longer needed, she chose to leave.

The problem, however, was where to go: when she left Seattle, she had burnt her boats. Her children now had lives of their own and could not include her either in their day-to-day activities or financially. She found herself alone, penniless, on an island little more than primeval, where there was no electrical power or telephone lines, where the inadequacy of the roads and transport meant that simply traveling from one place to another was an adventure. I learnt – though not from her – that she was taken in by some peasants in the area, and lived with them for a time. We can but guess at what this experience involved, but it must have been harsh and distressing to adapt to these inscrutable, primitive people, to their daily habits so different from the American system, to having to share their table, their food, their bathroom. But if there was one thing Inés Purcell had experience in, it was survival, and not in a humble wooden shack in the vicinity of Manao, at that, but in a much more dramatic terrain: the operating theater. In the seventeen years she worked as a surgeon’s aide she had seen countless human beings survive and die. She had fought side by side with surgeons and anesthetists. She would not be cowed by something as absurd as finding herself alone in Chiloé.

It was then she took an extraordinary decision: she would stay on the island for good. A priori, it might seem there is some missing link in the logic of her thinking, one might wish to ask why she did not decide to return to Seattle or to Viña del Mar, or perhaps seek a job in some other city in the States. But Inés, nestled in her favorite lounge, looking out over that infinite sea, slowly sipping her coffee, does not simply convey a feeling of enigma, but also an extraordinary fortitude. This is palpable in her gestures, in the way she speaks, in that home she built practically with her own hands. It was, perchance, that devastating, hardly suppressed fortitude, linked perhaps to the almost incongruous fear of feeling lonelier in the United States than in Chiloé, that launched her on what was to be the greatest adventure of her life. Or, conceivably, she

was entrapped by the beauty of the landscape, by a culture that in no way resembled the rest of Chile – or even the rest of the world – because of the very rusticity and invaluable introspection it provided.

After a time, possibly with some help, she was able to buy the small plot by the sea, and gradually built up her house, with blue-painted doors and windows, and a brick-colored zinc roof.

Fourteen years had elapsed. She showed me round her home, made me climb the stairs to see her bedroom, made entirely of wood, with an enormous window opening onto that profoundly blue sea, and I discovered in her an unequivocal pride in what she had managed to create. But it was not simply her home that was on display or an eye-catching show of decorative art, it was her entire life she was laying bare. Now her work of art was concluded and entirely in order. But it had not always been so.

“I didn’t have electricity for more than ten years,” she told me. “Let alone a cell phone. I simply made do with what I had.”

Nor did she have a motorcar, which she could have used to travel to Ancud, just thirty-five kilometers away. But that house she had set her heart on building, with no electrical power and no telephone, was unexpected nourishment for her soul. What mattered was not the technique but the spirit. In those harsh days she began to relate to the Huilliche descendants peopling the hills, to study their customs, to attempt to understand them and decipher their codes, to speak their language. She became *doña* Inés, who was always willing to help them, to place all her knowledge at their disposal or to come to their aid in an emergency. What a difference with the efficient, impersonal inhabitants of Seattle, in a city where everything worked. In Manao you never even got to see the money. If someone owed someone else a favor, he would appear on the other’s doorstep with a sack of potatoes, a bundle of firewood, or a bag of delicious seafood as a sign of appreciation. In an economic system based on barter, as it was at the time, it was unthinkable to take someone’s money or send them a bill. Yet her relationship with these people was not built with the curious eye of an anthropologist, or the methodology of a sociologist, or the intermittent visits of a social worker. Hers was the attitude of a friend, a confidante.

The rigors life in Chiloé imposed on its inhabitants gradually waned over time: the advent of electricity and cell phones revolutionized communications and relationships on the island, for people could be contacted instantly, even on the remotest island on the archipelago. Over the years her bond with the peasants deepened as she got to know them better. And they began to confide in Inés, and to need her. When a peasant woman in the environs is about to give birth, no matter the time of day or night, Inés Purcell’s cell phone rings and off she goes in her car – for now she has one – to look for the mother in labor and take her to Ancud, which is thirty-five kilometers from Pulelo.

“None of the peasants knows I was an instruments aide and worked in a hospital. I’ve preferred to keep that fact a secret,” she cautioned me.

She is, however, part of their lives, something in no way easy to achieve. How could one communicate with those impervious beings whose veins pulsed with the ancestral blood of Chonos and Huilliches, and who were still steeped in mythology and witchcraft? To them *El Caleuche*, the phantom ship that roams the seas of nights carrying the souls of shipwrecked mariners, even able to sail through the submerged archipelago, is as valid as *El Thrauco*, the mannikin who lies in wait in the gloom of the thick forests to rape unwary maidens.

The natives, too, continue to surprise her with their peculiar sense of humor. She loves these peasants she has mingled with since the old days when she endured

hardship; and can she help secretly admiring them for their irony when they talk about their *family pittance*, when actually referring to their *family remittance*, which is a very meager pension.

Inés showed me round her garden before I left. It was not large in comparison with those to be found in other Chiloé houses, but each foot of the land seemed to be a source of pride to her, perhaps because this too was the work of her hands. It was not a compendium of plants and flowers, with obsessively elegant, strategically positioned flowerbeds, but instead a simple lawn bordering on a small grove of trees. And then, of course, she had that unrestrained beach stretching down to the Manao bay. We walked along those volcanic sands and she told me of her joy when summer came round, for it was then her children and friends came to see her, and solitude, normally kept rigorously leashed took off for a time. She spends most of the year alone, from May to November in the company of incessant rains and unspeakable dampness. But she is used to it, and has taken her cue from the natives of Chiloé.

A penguin suddenly materialized from the water, as if by magic, and staggered clumsily along the beach. It was hurt and, as we approached, it tottered off into the sea again. We carried on walking, and on looking back we saw the bird on the beach again, as though seeking refuge on this lonely beach. It was, perhaps, thus that Inés Purcell had reached the coasts of Chiloé over fifteen years before, no doubt hurt by life, in search of refuge. And things hadn't gone too badly for her. What would have become of her if after separating from her husband she had stayed on in Seattle? She would simply have been one more name on a long list of thousands of retired surgeon's aides going on their weekly errand to the supermarket, or playing bridge with equally lonely friends, or joining some association for the defense of some cause or another. In Pulelo, instead, she had found what a person rarely, if ever, finds in this world: she was unique. There are more than enough retired surgeon's aides in the United States, where they can be counted in their hundreds of thousands. In Chiloé, instead, there is only one Inés Purcell, who had come with nothing more than the clothes on her back and had eventually managed to build her own home; Inés, beloved of the country people; Inés, who would get up at any hour of the night to rush a woman in labor to Ancud. She is perhaps the only *afuerina* who can be considered a *Chilota*. Nobody becomes a *Chilote*, for it is well nigh impossible. How could one become part of that rare culture if not descended from the first settlers or the Spanish conquistadores? *Chilote* is a question of birth.

As we strolled back to the house I surprised her with a question about the place where she lived.

What does Pulelo mean in native tongue?

She gazed at me perplexed for a moment and then shrugged.

"Nobody knows what it means," she answered.

It struck me as paradoxical: for this remote town at the ends of the earth had given her life a meaning both profound and enduring.

Once again I made my way back to Manao, this time in the company of Catalina Cruz, Teresa Vera's former Santiago schoolmate, who lived in Teupa, where she owned a delicious house peeking out onto the inland sea. There are women to whom aesthetics is a priority in life, though not in terms of art but of decoration, and their homes are apt to be a veritable visual treasure trove for anyone fortunate enough to visit them. This was what I had found at Catalina's. We set off from Chonchi and

traveled the long road to Manao by car. Not that it was so far, for the distance was only a hundred and thirty kilometers, but it so happens that in Chiloé roads are always under repair, which means the going is tiresomely slow. Catalina wanted to introduce me to a friend of hers who had recently been widowed, and she especially wanted me to see this friend's house, considered unique on the island.

Once we made it to Manao, we took a gravel road that plunged deep into the surrounding fields and eventually led us to a wooden gate, the entrance to an unbelievably sophisticated world concealed among the hills, with a garden of dazzling beauty and a house with manifold roofs overlooking a tiny bay. The door was opened by a maid right out of an Ivory-Merchant movie: meticulously uniformed in black, with a white apron, cap and gloves. She led us into the lounge where each piece of furniture, each object was an indissoluble link in a particular visual design. A table in a certain corner was right where it had to be, and no other could have taken its place in that impeccable drawing room. It did, perhaps, reflect a certain *horror vacui* 'fear of emptiness', for furniture, pictures and ornaments abounded in an openly anti-minimalist approach.

Angélica Cubillos looked as though she had stepped out of an Estée Lauder commercial with her blonde hair neatly tied back and her trim attire. After the predictable *pisco sours* and some conventional small talk, we lunched in a small, though exquisite, dining room. The table was overly refined, with its delicate flatware, crystal stem-glasses and silver cutlery. Our hostess talked incessantly, displaying a mundane style worthy of New York or Paris, while we savored oysters from the tiny bay facing the house, followed by spider crab and a delectable dessert. Unexpectedly, she let slip that she had graduated from the Economic Sciences College, a fact that surprised me. I would have expected her to have studied something like architecture, or letters, evoking Palladio or Racine, instead of debating international finance and foreign trade, which were her pet subjects. But during that lunch our conversation did not touch even for an instant on her college education or her profession, possibly out of deference to Catalina, who presumably would not have been interested. There before me were two women in no way responding to typical Chiloé archetypes, and looking rather as though they might have been more at home in Santiago or Paris. It would never even have crossed their minds, for instance, to lunch in the kitchen with family and friends gathered round the fireplace, as Chiloé people were typically wont to do. It would have been simply outrageous. And, as was to be expected, the domestic help did not lunch with the family, nor did they express any opinion. The maid moved deftly round the table fetching and carrying plates and dishes like a ballerina on a stage, flaunting her *grand jetées*, *promenades* and *arabesques*, hard-earned skills learned under the rigorous schooling of an implacable teacher who was none other than our hostess.

However, despite that masterly show of style, I was soon to discover the house was haunted. The ghost was no Chiloé deity, nor the phantom of some previous resident; it was, in fact, Hernán Cubillos, Angélica's husband and former Chilean chancellor. The couple had built the home together and had spent most of the year there, far from Santiago, and from the inevitable criticism their marriage aroused.

The sea was an essential part of Hernán's life. He had been a seaman and his yacht, a Catalina 28, was always anchored down there in the bay. The buoy was still there. When he died the boat was inherited by one of his sons. Indeed, a glance over the wooden veranda was enough to get a glimpse of the tiny white buoy, floating in lonely dignity on the large expanse of the bay. The vessel, too, had become something of a phantom, looming up in countless framed photos, sailing in the vicinity of Manao, approaching the Chilean continent with the volcanoes as a backdrop. And all these

pictures depicted a smiling, unconcerned couple, my hostess and her departed Hernán. But in order to understand why that house so steadfastly held onto its ghost, we should first seek some insight into Hernán Cubillos' background and his trajectory in Chilean politics.

The sea being second nature to Cubillos, it is only fair to point to the way it contributed to his political career. He was one of the founders of the *Cofradía Náutica del Pacífico* (Nautical Brotherhood of the Pacific>), in 1967, which gathered civilians and uniformed men, with no lack of prominent figures, from Agustín Edwards, the owner of *El Mercurio* newspaper, in Santiago, to Admiral Merino. Along with other members, Cubillos was one of the key figures in the fall of Marxist President Salvador Allende in 1973, and it was not surprising, therefore, that general Augusto Pinochet should have appointed him Chancellor in the 70's. His diplomatic path was marked by one particularly notable triumph and one appalling disgrace.

His greatest success was his stealthy international politics as Chancellor, salvaging the country from international economic isolation, and developing a sturdy trade; but image-wise, it was his role in avoiding the war between Argentina and Chile that marked the peak of his political career. In fact, problems between these two countries in connection with the boundaries in the Beagle Channel, in Tierra del Fuego, almost led to a war in 1978, and it was the Vatican mediation in the person of Cardinal Antonio Samoré that averted an armed conflict that could have had a devastating aftermath. But behind it all was also the hand, the expertise and the diplomatic skill of Hernán Cubillos. Yet, blunders and unexpected oversights awaited just around the bend. In March 1980, Chilean President, Augusto Pinochet, decided to make a State visit to the Philippines, an initiative Cubillas was not entirely in agreement with. Twenty minutes before the presidential aircraft landed in Manila, President Ferdinand Marcos decided to suspend the visit, forcing Pinochet to land on the Fiji islands instead, with the ensuing international ignominy.

Pinochet was furious, and retreated into himself for two hours, during which he flatly refused to talk to any of his ministers. Never had he been so humiliated. Seated in an armchair in his Regent Hotel suite, the jacket of his uniform gaping open, his shirt unbuttoned, he glared stonily at the ceiling of the room. Suddenly, he started to yell at the top of his voice, pointing angrily at chancellor Cubillos.

"You simply understand nothing of what is going on!" he bellowed. "Nothing! I have been the object of a coup d'état!"

It was only later the Chilean dictator learnt it was not a coup d'état propitiated by Washington and "softer" sectors of his government, but simply a personal decision by the Filipino head of state. But Cubillos political career was on the wane.

There are times in people's lives when everything seems to crumble, perhaps because circumstances and inner processes force them into changes they are unprepared for. Who could ever have imagined that the irony of a Filipino dictator actually subjecting his Chilean counterpart to such an affront could jeopardize the position of a chancellor? Who would have guessed that Hernán Cubillos' marriage, strengthened by the bonds of time, might eventually founder as a consequence? How could it ever have crossed anybody's mind that he would fall in love with a woman so close to his own family circle, in a romance that was to cause an uproar in Santiago.

Angélica Cubillos slowly sipped her coffee in that flawless dining room, with her cup, of course, exactly matching each carefully selected item in the room. A sunny afternoon in Chiloé... She eventually chose to sit on the veranda, beside Catalina Cruz, looking out onto the tiny bay and the white buoy, the immensity of that ocean she had so often sailed upon.

“Hernán and I had known each other for many years,” Angélica reflected. “Actually, we were two couples who used to go out for meals, we’d go off for a weekend just the four of us, and spend the summers together in Algarrobo... just that, a typical friendship like that so many other couples share. One day I was out strolling in Santiago and met Hernán: out of the blue, he invited me to have a cup of coffee.

Yet that harmless cup of coffee was to lead them headlong into a love affair that overtook them when they were no longer young, and flowered into a love that would challenge all the bourgeois conventions. For it was over that coffee that each learnt the other was now divorced and that now, at long last, they were free.

“The coffee turned into lunches,” she continued, “until one day we discovered we were in love.”

Though Angélica did not mention it, it is not hard to imagine what they must have undergone from family, friends and society when they made their relationship public. It was probably then that Chiloé emerged as the only way of getting away from the *coterie* in Santiago, and from their no doubt disgruntled children, and creating a world of their own surrounded by the stunning landscapes of Chiloé. In the solitude of the Manao bay they would make a life for themselves. The Corcovado Gulf would become a new sea for them to explore. Their home would be absolutely perfect, transcending the typical decoration of summer homes, a haven for personal objects treasured over a lifetime. Thus it was the Cubillos built their house and sought refuge in Chiloé, where time seemed not to exist. There would always be good friends who would visit them, and regattas to reunite fellow seamen. The formula worked and they seemed to have achieved their Paradise Regained. But one day Hernán Cubillos took the plane from Puerto Montt to Santiago, on what was simply another flight. Only a few hours later he succumbed to a fatal heart attack.

Angélica sat pensively on the veranda, gazing off into a spot somewhere beyond the horizon. This house had been built by two people and now only one of them was left, a fact which caused a vacuum even in those visiting the place, a feeling of almost terrifying solitude. This woman clung to aesthetics in a desperate effort to survive, and actually seemed to wish to get away from it all. I asked her whether she had ever considered selling the house.

“Only if they were willing to pay what I ask,” she said. “And I don’t mean merely financially. I put my very soul into this, and I have no intention of simply giving it away.”

She has also devoted herself to the garden, an amazing and refined sampler of vegetable species. We walked round it slowly, and at each flowerbed she would stop and give Catalina an explanation of the flowers she had planted. Something told me that this belated love for gardening might to some extent be a cover for the solitude stalking these two women who had been, each in their own way, unique. But life had led them into this apparent blind alley, or at least an impasse, though for entirely different reasons. Catalina, had, perhaps, chosen a life of solitude. Hers had been a life of stormy passions, encounters and disagreements, of impulsive decisions riding on the unrestrainedness of youth. She was, mayhap, exhausted by so much movement, which, as years wore on, possibly began to make no sense. Which was why she loved Chiloé, where she was able to recreate a world wherein youth, beauty, banality, competition were totally unnecessary to living. She could make do with that sea and those mountains, which in Teupa come close to being glorious. And what was more, she had no need of anyone.

For Angélica Cubillos, instead, solitude had stolen up stealthily, abruptly, because death had suddenly come upon her – as it so often does. In the blink of an eye,

without any warning, her dreams turned into a nightmare: the man she loved, the common project they shared, the peace brought on by the years had all vanished. The buoy floating in the tiny cove was the clearest symbol of her sore loss. Yet the house they had built together still stood. It was still possible to live off memories. It was enough for her to see a picture or a tapestry to recall those happy times. And also, everything that had belonged to Hernán, that collection of tiny male objects scattered on the tables and in the library. But, like Catalina, she was alone. And it was there that aesthetics, an obsession for impeccable décor became an ally able to cover the absences and make them forget those days gone forever.

As they chatted in the garden, or rather, as they indulged in a botany class in which they seemed to know the name and secrets of each flower and each bush, time seemed to give way to sheer beauty. It was the perfect refuge.

I thought it was the right time to inquire into the whereabouts of another Manao dweller I had been wanting to meet for some time, a lady I had heard about on numerous occasions. She was a psychoanalyst, doctor Adriana Schnake, who some time before had set up a Gestalt sanctuary right there in Manao, attended by patients from Chile and, most particularly, from Argentina. I knew vaguely that there was in Chiloé a sort of *ashram*, actually, a therapeutic center where gestalt was applied and that it was in Manao. These vague references took shape the day I met Catalina Cruz, in Teupa: she pointed out its location, surprisingly only a few kilometers from Angélica's house, which in these areas was almost like being next-door neighbors. I suggested she accompany me to visit Adriana Schnake, but perceived in Catalina a subtle resistance to this initiative, though no explanation was forthcoming. What might have been simply a visit from someone living in the vicinity or from someone who had also chosen Chiloé as her place of residence, somehow became an awkward situation, as though there were something unknown floating in the air, some dark crevice she preferred to leave untouched. Angélica set me on my way, with the usual lack of accuracy so typical of the island, which means a person rarely finds what they have gone in search of. She did, however, give me one key piece of information that kept me from getting lost.

"When you see a doll's house by the sea, that's it."

It was, perhaps, the best direction she could have given me, as though she had put an old rudimentary parchment map in my hand. There it stood, a tiny green and red house close to the beach and a larger edifice which seemed to be part of this southern *ashram*, thronging with young people, clearly ethnic in appearance, with their pigtailed and even a guitar, an image far removed from the predictable *yuppie* look I had expected to find. I thought I was in the wrong place but it was, in fact, *Anchimalién*, the therapeutic center. Doctor Schnake, however, I was told by a young man, was not there, but over at the house, which could just be made out on a nearby hill. It was not easy for me to relate this group of youngsters to gestalt, or to any of the psychoanalytical theories in vogue a few decades ago, which required from the person doing psychoanalysis a minimum of intellectual and humanistic preparation. A therapy session required some extent of abstract thought, something obviously not abounding in the new Latin American generations. It was not the unprepossessing appearance of those two houses by the sea – though I must admit I had, in fact, doubted they could actually be *Anchimalién* – but the presence of these young people who seemed to convey little in the way of introspection and insight. Perhaps the memories of my own psychoanalytical experience – back in the sublime 1960's – had become part of a museum of patterns. But the world had changed and psychoanalysis, such as it was understood by my generation, believed it had all the answers, whether the conflicts were emotional, sexual or existential, and resembled a religion rather than a therapeutic treatment. Its axioms

were equivalent to dogmas of faith. I do not mean by this that psychotherapy lacks significance or is not essential today, but that life was seen through a single glass, which led to a sectarian sort of fanaticism. Ingmar Bergman and Woody Allen – particularly in *Manhattan* – became the patriarchs of that new religion, charged with symbolisms and complicated neuroses, a jargon solely for initiates. Of course, at the time Jean Paul Sartre and Pablo Picasso still lived, to name only a few of the geniuses who seem to have disappeared in post-modernism. But on the verge of the new millennium, psychology – and economy – had changed drastically in South America. For reasons both existential and financial many people had neither the time nor the money to persist in therapies that promised to modify their lives and, on the other hand, it is likely doctor Schnakno no longer had the youthful impulse or the fascination awakened by new theories.

I set off for the house on the hill, where I would find Adriana Schnake, a task far from simple for I ended up getting lost. But one of her children, whose house I came upon by chance, showed me the way. I wondered what kind of relationship this gestalt space in Manao might offer when mingled with the culture of the island, and I must confess I was unable to envisage it. I could not even imagine a Chilote in a gestalt therapy session, for it was as though I were thinking of two diametrically contrasting worlds. In fact, there were few people in Castro who knew of the existence of *Anchimmallén*.

Who was doctor Schnake? She was a Chilean psychiatrist who had embraced gestalt therapy and who – perhaps due to ideological problems in a country where once acute intolerance had reigned towards new forms of thought – had transferred her activities to Chiloé, where she spent most of the year. There, in the early 1980's she had founded *Anchimmallén*, which in Mapuche tongue means *friend of the sun*, a clear reference to the vital inner light that makes therapies possible, but none the less ironic in a land where the sun emerges but infrequently. Yet the proposal was absolutely original. It was the perfect combination of nature and psychotherapy, of group treatments and horseback rides, of feeling differently. It all meant that during people's stay there, a particularly rich dialogue was sparked around their personal conflicts, whether sentimental, existential or health-related. They were the times of the "body-mind dichotomy", when psychiatrists' couches uncovered the fact that human beings were a single unit and not a separate being – as the Judeo-Christian root would have it –, when there was time to enjoy reading *Point Counterpoint* by Aldous Huxley, focusing precisely on this, and when psychotherapy with hallucinogens – in particular lysergic acid – promised profound changes.

Adriana Schnake discovered gestalt and felt that, as a therapeutic tool, it was probably far above Freudian, Kleinian or Lacanian approaches. This travel book is most likely not the best place to try and explain what *gestalt* is all about, no easy task if one wishes to reduce it to only a few words, but it is perhaps worth noting that Gestalt psychology emerged in Germany around 1910, as a result of what came to be known as the Science Crisis. According to Mary Henle, in *Gestalt Psychology and Therapy*, not only science but academic learning in general had gradually lost its confidence in a number of persons, including intellectuals, because it could not relate to human aspects, for instance to problems such as values or meanings, which it seemed to have no interest in. A speculative discipline emerged in psychology, as opposed to traditional experimental psychology, the aim of which was to understand rather than to explain. Fritz Perls was one of the leading proponents of gestalt therapy, and doctor Adriana Schnake was one of his most devoted disciples.



How could this type of knowledge be applied on a remote island in the south of Chile? How to apply this utterly complex theory of a “whole” that gestalt was based on? How could she convey to her patients Perls’ most sacred principles? “*Reality is in fact no more than the sum of all the states of awareness while experiencing the here and now*”, was one of Perls’ axioms. Schnake took these precepts to the southernmost areas of the earth, and it was thus that *Anchimallén* became, from the end of the 70’s, a sort of sanctuary for those who were to some extent bored with traditional, interminable psychoanalysis, involving four sessions a week at an astronomical cost. What better than to travel to an island with a cultural identity of its own, held in low regard by the jet set, to take part in group gestalt sessions, with a charming psychotherapist and an idyllic landscape of sea, prairies and mountains. For years the sanctuary filled with people in search of their identities and wanting to approach their problems from an entirely novel perspective.

The therapist’s house was, naturally, made of timber, with a mezzanine doubling as a second floor. Her daughter, María José, met me at the door and warned me her mother was attending to some patients, which was obvious for the conversation could be heard through the wood and cane walls. She added I should have asked for an interview if I wanted to talk to her. I retorted that I was neither in New York nor in London, but practically at the ends of the earth and had covered almost one hundred and thirty kilometers of appalling roads, which I never expected to be able to do again. On the other hand, I told her I had not come as a patient but as a writer. My arguments must have convinced her, for she let me in.

Visitors were announced – and celebrated – by carillons hanging in the hall. On an armchair languished a felt Santa Claus, along with some spangled Hindu cushions, and bronze objects from India; and, as the humidity in Chiloé is unbearable, some garments hung still damp from the mezzanine balustrade. María José had previously led me to a nearby building protected by a tiny copse, and she mentioned this was where her mother held her group sessions. It was a spacious building, with several windows and cushions scattered on the floor, providing the viewer with an unequivocal sense of *déjà vu*: it was like the therapeutic cabinets of the sixties, when psychodrama was in its apogee, along with group therapy with hallucinogens. There was a feeling of anachronism in *Anchimallén*, as though that stage, its characters, the techniques to reach down into the soul, made up a proposal belonging to another time when dialectic prevailed along with other values. But the new millennium seemed to have entirely done away with that culture, which made the strangeness of this place even more intense.

María José then went on to tell me about her mother’s tight agenda, the number of annual seminars, her patients, without, of course, forgetting to stress she had been the one to introduce gestalt in Chile.

“*Mamá* is tired of attending to so many patients,” she confessed. “She would prefer to devote her time solely to research and teaching.

I imagined a woman of European, basically Swiss features, for I had seen a photo of her hanging on one of the walls, where her image was the exaltation of sobriety: short grey hair, a jumper dress and an expression of existential placidness for someone close to seventy. This was not what I saw when she eventually turned up on the threshold. Doctor Adriana Schnake had excessively long hair, curly and blonde, she was sheathed in very tight trousers, without straying from the ethnic look prevailing in the area.

I found a striking similarity with American actress Piper Laurie, when she interpreted the esoteric mother in *Carrie*. She led me into the sitting room, where one of

the armchairs was taken up by a supposedly Argentine patient, clad in a grey jogging suit, there to share our encounter. She made it clear she had little time and was interested to know who I was and what I was doing on the island. In fact, she heard me out civilly, listening patiently and never setting aside a copybook she held on her lap, as though it were simply a protocol visit – as, in fact, it was. She had neither the time nor the interest to explain what gestalt essentially was, which might have been to some extent valuable, for she was quite well-known in South America and Spain, and it was beyond dispute she had introduced the theory in Chile. She might have made the account more attractive, leaving aside the intellectual aridness of gestalt treatises.

But I inadvertently made a mistake.

I mentioned I had been lunching at the home of her neighbor, Angélica Cubillos, and because I was so close, had ventured this far. She nodded vaguely, as though aware of how close the other was. It would have been well nigh impossible for her to be unaware of the fact that less than five kilometers away, in a place known as Manao, lived the widow of a Chilean chancellor who had acquired unusual renown. I went on to add – and that was my *faux pas* – that I had traveled from Chonchi with Catalina Cruz, a lady who lived in Teupa.

“Oh, yes...,” she answered abstractedly.

Suddenly, doctor Adriana Schnake, the introducer of a new therapeutic theory in South America, the decipherer of human conflicts, fixed her solemn gaze on me. It was a fleeting expression, a rare glimmer in the way she looked at me, that made me suspect that, as an Englishman might say, *I had dropped a brick*<sup>8</sup>. And there was no doubt it was a somewhat heavy brick. She got to her feet almost mechanically, notebook in hand, ready to depart.

“I have no time to provide you with explanations about gestalt,” she said in clipped tones. “If you like, my daughter can do it.”

And with that she withdrew.

I returned to Angélica Cubillos’ place puzzled as to what had happened. During that brief walk I sought to put together this strange jigsaw, unable to find an explanation to her reaction, for the air had seemed to crackle with electricity. Admittedly, I would have preferred to talk to doctor Schnake, even though I had found *Anchimallén* and its occupants somewhat *demodées*. But the mere fact of continuing to attend to her patients, of running a therapeutic center at the ends of the earth, of organizing seminars and indefatigably reaching down into people’s souls, turned her into a unique personality.

I found Angélica and Catalina having tea on the veranda, which suggested the botany attack they had undergone prior to my departure had waned. The maid was once again repeating the same choreography, but this time carrying sandwiches and toast and the appropriate chinaware. In the tiny cove, the white buoy sat on, as lonely as it had been at noon.

“Tell us how you got on,” Catalina asked, eagerly.

I couldn’t help telling her that the mere mention of her name had put an end to all cordiality, all hospitality. Catalina sat pensively, as though trying to pluck up the courage to browse in that obscure past that somehow linked them, as though time had not yet healed their scars. What could have happened between these two women who had so little in common but who had, however, chosen to live in Chiloé. They were not colleagues, professionally speaking – which might have explained some conceptual differences –, nor did they belong to the same social class, or have friends in common. Their youth, too, was part of their past.

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<sup>8</sup> Translator’s note: In English in the original

Some drama students perform an exercise that helps them become familiar with a part and provides a more solid background to the characters they are to interpret. This technique is known as “prior history”, a fascinating exercise that involves imagining how the action transpired *before* the play started, through improvisation. The exercise concludes where the first act starts. I was irresistibly tempted to carry out an exercise of that nature. How would Catalina Cruz have approached the prior history? She would have improvised that *before*, where a long-ago encounter with Adriana Schnake had taken place in a remote past right there, in Chiloé. And, perhaps by exception, it was not a case of the French axiom *cherchez la femme*, but rather, *cherchez l’homme*.

In the improvisation, Catalina would have had to choose between two paths: the behavior put forward in J.B. Priestley’s *Dangerous Corner*, where a cigarette-box and the search for truth unleashes passions and eventually leads to tragedy; or, instead, take the course suggested in the last act, which duplicates the first, though when the cigarette-box turns up everyone ignores it, for none of them wishes to find out the truth, preferring to make it successfully round that dangerous corner.

Catalina opted for the first path – the truth. Which led to a victor and a vanquished, one who carried off the trophy and the other who had no option but acceptance. But beyond any shadow of doubt the winner, by walkover, was Catalina.

The female soul is not easy to decipher and time, at least in this case, seemed not to have elapsed. They must have been two young, astoundingly beautiful women, independent and inclined to carry the world before them, yet destiny unfortunately led to their meeting, decades ago, in Chiloé – at the time a remote island, cut off from the mainland, with no salmon fisheries or ferries – and to their ending their lives on that same island. The world is so often amazingly tiny, not only geographically speaking. More than forty years had elapsed, yet for them, time had stood still, as though certain hurts more closely related to pride than to tragedy, were incurable.

I never saw Catalina again, as though this incident had somehow contributed to her drifting away. Angélica had suggested having a get-together in her home so I could meet other island inhabitants, but this initiative was – very elegantly – substituted with an unexpected trip to Puerto Montt. The last time I spoke to Catalina on the phone, she confessed that my visit to *Anchimallén* and its outcome had been profoundly distressing. On my second visit to Chiloé, I thought another interview with doctor Adriana Schnake might be enlightening. A year had already elapsed and, perhaps, we might engage in a less prejudiced dialogue, for I would have wanted to tell her that, though lacking in precise knowledge of the gestalt theory, for over a decade I had dabbled in Kleinian psychotherapy, which included alternative sessions using lysergic acid, mescaline and psilocybin. I have no doubts it would have been fascinating. But the female soul and its inveterate pride prevailed, which clearly goes to show there are things a woman can go her whole life without forgiving.

I left more than one message on doctor Schnake’s mobile phone, reminding her who I was and asking her for an interview.

I never got a reply.

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## SPIRITUAL POWER

The drizzle that noon towards the end of December made the *Plaza de Armas* in Ancud even drearier. There was nothing reminiscent of its erstwhile Hispanic architectural grandeur, for the *Plaza* had no buildings to remind one of the past, no church with dazzling wooden interiors. That Spanish bastion founded in 1768, with its colossal fortresses – and cannons capable of dissuading any vessel daring to approach, was the pivotal point of the archipelago and eventually became the epicenter for maritime trade, capital of Chiloé and cultural center *par excellence*; today, however, it no longer had much to offer in terms of power. Not even the old cathedral had managed to survive: the severe damages it suffered in the 1960 earthquake led to it being dynamited, and though another was erected in its place, it followed the architectural trends of the time. As though all this had not been enough, in the 1980's it was decided it would no longer be the capital of the island, an honor conferred on Castro instead. But though temporal power was transferred to the new capital, spiritual power yet remains in Ancud projecting its solid influence from the Episcopate. The Catholic Church in these southern regions has enormous ascendancy over a profoundly devout population, ancestrally accustomed to patron saint feasts and the presence of their bishop, who could well be given the category of a spiritual chief.

Yet Ancud – or, as it was known at the time, San Carlos de Ancud – had known times of splendor. It was a formidable stronghold in the Pacific Ocean, comparable in offensive power to the fortifications in Niebla and Corral, close to Valdivia, in those memorable times when cannon thundered from sailing vessels and the land batteries responded with all the force of gunpowder. Imagine, for an instant, the unbelievably complicated maneuvers involved in taking a fort with cannon strategically aiming at the sea, with only the wind to carry the vessel forward. At the very most, the captain of a frigate raring for conquest located in the forecastle could, with the aid of a spyglass, anticipate some risks or define certain profiles, but the success of the enterprise, though influenced by the expertise and courage of men, was ultimately in the hands of God. What most alarmed Spain's enemies was the Ahui fortress, still standing at the tip of the Lacuy peninsula, and well nigh impregnable. How could they approach Ancud with this ominous fortress and its lethal cannon to defend it? A no less threatening complement was the string of land batteries – Balcacura and Corona, to name only the most outstanding of them, which helped to keep invasions at bay.

And it was thus, of course, until the winds of independence reached Chile, with the resounding battles and the incredible feats of Lord Cochrane who seized the Niebla and Corral forts on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1820, forcing Valdivia to capitulate when the powerful stronghold fell into the hands of the royalists. But they had yet to capture Chiloé, which had not joined in the drive for freedom, and which had a particularity of its own: the island's governor, José Antonio Quintanilla, was one of the most stubborn men alive, and flatly refused to yield to the invaders. He would never give up Chiloé and would fight until the last drop of blood to avoid such ignominy, an intention that was

eventually to be prophetic. Lord Cochrane, stimulated by his naval victory, considered there should not exist in Chile a stronghold like Ancud. It would have to be seized and all the Spaniards routed, to ensure the Pacific and its strategic ports remained in Republican hands. To the British admiral this mayhap amounted to no more than a formality. He set off for Chiloé only a few days after having conquered Valdivia, with two vessels, a schooner, the *Motezuma*, and a transporter, the *Dolores*, on what he anticipated as a relatively easy mission. He was grossly mistaken, for he had no idea of who Quintanilla was and the stuff he was made of. He arrived on February 17<sup>th</sup> – only thirteen days after having subdued Niebla and Corral – and returned mortified to Valdivia the following day, after being routed in the encounter. What made him desist? As a matter of fact, it was the Ahui fortress, perched on a rocky promontory reaching out into the sea, and well nigh unconquerable.

It was not until January 1822, almost two years later, that Chilean Republicans attempted to seize Chiloé, but this time by diplomatic avenues. General Bernardo O'Higgins – today the greatest of the country's founding fathers – sent Clemente Lantaño, a Spaniard who had fought against the incipient republic, with a missive addressed to Quintanilla, suggesting an honorable arrangement that would allow the archipelago to become independent from Spain. The governor politely refused and the emissary returned empty-handed to the corvette *Chacabuco*. Quintanilla would never hand over San Carlos de Ancud or the island. Without wasting time, he set himself to the task of readying the island for the coming invasion he inevitably anticipated. Pedro Barrientos Díaz, in his *Historia de Chiloé (History of Chiloé)*, recreates the man's spirit.

*For the Spanish governor (he was referring to Quintanilla) the refusal involved enormous responsibility. The problem of the archipelago, now more complex than ever, was eventually to be resolved on the battlefield. From then on, therefore, he did not economize on sacrifices or fatigues. He placed weapons in the hands of anyone in condition to engage in war, which meant Chiloé provided the best example of patriotic energy among all the American peoples, comparable to what Republican France did in 1792 and 1793 when it reinforced its frontiers with fourteen armies, as described by Barros Arana<sup>1</sup>.*

This, of course, led to the second attempt at conquering Chiloé territory, under the orders of Captain Ramón Freire and General Beauchef, early in 1824, also ending in failure. The arrival at the time of a Spanish squadron in Ancud provided Quintanilla with forces sufficient to resist, if required, a third invasion. The Ahui fortress was a supreme bastion, and the idea of capitulating before the Republicans was simply ludicrous. How could the Crown be deprived of such a stronghold dominating the South Pacific, a royalist enclave able to withstand any onslaught, and which should under no circumstances belong to the newly formed Republic of Chile? How timely had been the arrival of the Hispanic squadron! Now, the likelihood of their being able to resist was even stronger. But something had happened in South America. On December 9<sup>th</sup>, 1824, in the fields of Ayacucho, up in the heights of Peru, it was not an army that had capitulated but Spain herself. After three hundred years the supremacy of Spain in America had come to an end. As though caught up in an uncontrollable process, republics were popping up where once there had been viceroyalties, all of which

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<sup>1</sup> Eminent Chilean historian

contributed to turning Chiloé's resistance and desire to have a European king into an anachronism.

The invasion of Chiloé finally came about in 1826, paradoxically under the orders of the very same Captain Ramón Freire who had failed two years earlier. San Carlos de Ancud was now surrounded, not by a few vessels but by a superlative flotilla, with inordinate offensive might, and Freire was gentlemanly enough to suggest an honorable surrender to Quintanilla. But the indomitable governor refused to accept it. The battle was tilted in favor of the Republicans, but what eventually sealed their success was a sublime irony, an event that nobody could ever have anticipated. The Chilean strategy was to isolate the dreaded Ahui fortress, after carrying out intelligent landings in the proximities of Ancud, a city they were finally able to seize. The fortress, cut off from the troops and batteries, had become a kind of phantom, a paper tiger, a spectral bastion peopled with useless cannon.

Quintanilla eventually capitulated and left for Spain: no longer had he anything to do in these American lands.

But this, as I mentioned above, was the beginning of another story. Chilean patriots never forgave the Chilotes for their rebellion and for not embracing the cause of freedom. For over one hundred years they were condemned to insularity and oblivion, passed over as though this were something they would never be able to make amends for. And resentment festers still.

On arrival at Ancud, visitors will discover that, beyond the dazzling landscape of the Quetalmahue bay and the iridescent green hills on the Lacuy peninsula, the city conveys an enduring nostalgia and offers an image somewhat detached from its past splendors. In fact, at times it is as though it had come to a standstill, stopped in time. I had traversed the eighty kilometers that separate the town from Castro – an arduous task due to the condition of the roads – with the intention of interviewing Monsignor Juan Luis Ysern de Arce, Bishop of Ancud and, also, because I wished to have a brief encounter with Rosa Betty Muñoz, poetess and wife of the governor of Chiloé. When I got there I called the lady on the phone to arrange an appointment.

"I'll meet you at the Retrocafé," she said, with some vague reference to its location. "Now I'm out in the country, where I live, but I'll soon be going down to the city." It is curious the way people in Chiloé keep going up and down, for rarely are things at the same level.

"How will we recognize each other?" I asked.

"Don't worry, I know everybody who goes there. Besides, at this time there won't be many people around."

I had a little time to spare, and there wasn't too much to see, so I decided to exchange a hundred US dollars, something easily done in any town in the world – except Ancud. At the Banco del Estado de Chile (Chilean State Bank), the system had been down since early morning and they were unable to provide me with an exchange quotation. At a private bank I was told they did not change dollars for foreigners; I finally made my way to the third and last bank where I was told they could change my hundred dollars.

"Though, of course, you'll have to pay a commission," the bank clerk warned me.

"How much?"

"Twenty five percent."

Not only insularity and irredeemable nostalgia marked the particular makeup of Ancud, but also absurdity. What was even more serious in this particular case was that, in contrast to Castro, there wasn't a single exchange bureau. I decided to keep my

dollars and sauntered along to the Retrocafé, which, as was to be expected, was not on the street Rosa Betty Muñoz had told me it was on. The scenario I came upon was reminiscent, rather than of a Chilote bar, of a Parisian café prior to the environmentalist apogee: crowded with people chain-smoking and talking at the same time. How would I ever meet up with the governor's wife? I sat down at the only free table, on the assumption she was still on her way down to Ancud and would take a little longer to get there. At a nearby table, a young woman surrounded by men talked ceaselessly on one cell phone, while another rang with a fragment from a Mozart symphony. Someone else at the table answered it.

"It's for you, Rosa Betty," the person said, handing her the phone.

I thus discovered that the person with this hyperkinetic telephone fit was the one I had come to meet. I have never been able to understand how she managed to come down the mountain so fast and get to the café ahead of me. We eventually recognized one another and she invited me to her table, which she was sharing with intellectuals and even a photographer who, from the praise she gave him, might have been Man Ray's favorite disciple. The nostalgic city, though still living in the light of its ancient luster, and impregnable bastions, had something special Castro lacked: a rare intellectuality that gathered on an utterly cosmopolitan stage, like that I found at the Retrocafé. I supposed this was a daily ritual, taking place normally around noon, something indisputably praiseworthy given the insularity and remoteness of these people.

"Ancud is open to the world, and that is something that makes us different from the rest of Chiloé," declared Rosa Betty Muñoz, who had by now deactivated her cell phones.

"Our culture is different. Know why? Here, as we have neither fjords nor marshes, there are no salmon fisheries to change our Chilote habits. They're in Castro, like the private schools. The proliferation of these schools has disconnected our young people from daily reality, because they're studying in a sort of bubble, relating only to others of their kind. Changes here haven't been so sudden."

Rosa Betty had an unusual vivacity, a swift repartee, and a remarkable gift for gathering people together. Her magnetic personality, her poetic leanings, and the fact she was the wife of the governor of Chiloé all contributed to her efficient coordination of the artistic and intellectual activities at Ancud. Perhaps Ancud had, after all, been less affected by the changes, something that could not be said of Castro or of Quellón, the southernmost city in the archipelago. There was here an undoubted intellectualism and a nucleus of artists who had preserved their own scenario and unique rules of the game. And, though the city was economically underprivileged in comparison with the capital, there was much less violence and drugs than elsewhere.

"That's my life," confessed Rosa Betty, "always running from pillar to post, getting something organized. My husband's is much worse: he has to travel to Castro every day and doesn't get back until three in the morning."

Just the thought of someone having to traverse that road every day with its countless obstructions due to repairs, with interminable delays, and cars crawling along in Indian file made him practically a hero in my eyes. However, Ancud was not only the perfect backdrop for artists and poets, but also the epicenter of a powerful force officially established in 1841: the Episcopate. This small southern Vatican had undergone the unimaginable, sustaining people's faith, practicing catechism, supporting the Chilotes, assisting persecuted politicians, restoring the countless larch-tiled churches and chapels, getting the island to accept the beneficial changes brought on by postmodernism. Moreover, this was not simply another episcopate, or simply another

bishop like so many others in South America, carrying out his predictable functions. This was Monsignor Juan Luis Ysern de Arce, a man capable of weathering any storm, and confronting the powers that be when they flouted Christian precepts. At five in the afternoon I was to be received by the Bishop of Ancud.

The episcopal palace was a far cry from the grandeur so usual in large cities. It was a simple two-storey house made of timber and built on a steep slope, beside the cathedral, with a neat, well-trimmed garden and a green-painted fence. The interior was also made of wood, immaculately tidy with gleaming floors, almost overwhelmingly neat, and nothing out of place. The small lounge where I was taken by a Canadian nun opened onto the Ancud bay, that afternoon speckled with sunlight and shadow.

The history of Chiloé, as of the time of the Spanish conquest, was inextricably linked to the Church. There would be something missing in a travel book that did not include something about it, because its influence was much more significant than in other regions of Chile. When in 1557 Marshal Martín Ruiz de Gamboa conquered Chiloé (which had been discovered by Francisco de Ulloa in 1553), he found a poverty stricken people, unable to cultivate the lands because of the profusion of forests, isolated from the Mapuches who dominated the south of Chile, but, who, happily for the *conquistadores*, were not endowed with the ferocious warrior spirit of the Araucano Indians. And as these were new lands belonging to Spain, the infidels had to be converted and the archipelago colonized. The first to arrive in 1590 were the Franciscans and Mercedarians who not only set the requisite religious bases for the Indians, but also catechized the children of the Spanish settlers in Castro. However, it was not until 1608 that the first Jesuits came on the scene, and it was the members of the Company of Jesus who undertook the formidable task of organizing religion, economy and society in a severely rigorous land. But they were required to fight not only against nature at its most implacable but also against the Spaniards who raided Chiloé from the neighboring fortresses of Carelmapu and Calbuco. In 1610, only two years after disembarking, the Jesuits were to write in their *Carta Annuæ*:

*...because they (the Indians) have been very exposed to the ill-treatment they continually receive from the Spanish soldiers billeted in the fortresses, who patrol up and down that coast and the Indians, though concealed inland among woods and bushes, are unable to defend themselves against them; the soldiers steal everything off them, even their women and children, mistreating them by word and deed, and carrying them off by force as oarsmen for their Piraguas, and these ignorant, peace-loving people, intimidated by the hard work imposed on them by the King and their masters do not dare to speak, for this would simply increase their hardships.*

This was the situation that confronted the earliest Jesuit fathers Melchior Venegas, a Chilean, and the Milan-born Juan Bautista Ferrufino, when they first set foot on the land of Chiloé. The Order of Loyola was up against a gargantuan task requiring very careful and intelligent geographical planning: Chiloé had nothing in common with the rest of South America, for its isolation was exceptional, the indigenous population was disseminated among countless islands, but maritime communication was excellent and the remotest locations could be reached by sea. The island was immensely wealthy in timber, which ensured they would have fuel and the materials required for building dwellings or vessels.

Imagine for a moment these two Jesuits who, at the dawn of the eighteenth century, reached the coasts of Chiloé, an unknown universe peopled with Chono and Huilliche Indians, and entirely covered by dense forestland. How were they to organize



evangelization in a territory fragmented into myriad islands, with inhospitable cordilleras and nowhere to sow crops or breed animals? They would have to clear as much of the area as they could, use the local potato as food and, above all, create productive communities supervised by the Jesuits, with their respective churches and patron saint celebrations. The task of evangelization was, however, not limited solely to Chiloé and the nearby islands, but was to include other territories like the Guaitecas, on the other side of the Corcovado Gulf. During ensuing decades, many were the Jesuit priests who set off on these tiny rowing boats known as piraguas, plowing the fearsome sea, withstanding the incessant rain and wind, with the sole aim of expanding Christianity. Once they had established the Castro School, with four permanent priests, the travels back and forth between the islands became systematic. And with the gospel these men also took their music. It was Father Francisco van der Bergh – transformed by the Indians to Vargas – who taught the Chilotes music, imposing sacred chants that have remarkably been perpetuated, and are still sung today in churches and even on the vessels sailing from island to island. And then, of course, the Jesuits were there to see to other, worldlier needs, such as the terrible diseases that assailed the archipelago, like the epidemic of typhoid fever in 1632, or disasters like the hurricane that destroyed Carelmapu. Wherever they might be, and whatever might happen, they were there to provide the inhabitants with assistance and consolation, even if it meant journeying to the remotest of the islands.

The Company of Jesus, born as a reaction against Martin Luther and Protestantism with the Catholic Counter Reform, had formed its disciples to fight, for in addition to priests they were to be soldiers. This was no contemplative order, like the Dominicans or the Benedictines, or a mendicant order, like the Franciscans. Nor were its members mystics. The Jesuits were men of action. Europe was enduring an atrocious theological schism caused by the Reform and defiance towards the Papacy. Evangelization of Chiloé would take much more than simply faith. This to some extent explains the rare courage, the exploratory spirit, the administrative zeal evinced by these men in the years to follow. There is no knowing how Chiloé would have been evangelized without the presence of the Jesuits, but it would no doubt have lacked such perfection. In the eighteenth century the system was perfectly established and oiled, and went like clockwork. The Jesuits resolved to evangelize an area such as this scattered into countless tiny islands using what were known as *circular missions*, a method that gave them absolute control over their parishioners. Every year they would travel those eight hundred leagues, from September to May, from island to island, village to village, in something likening a procession of sacred images, but where a rigorous count was kept of the deaths, marriages and baptisms among these indigenous peoples, as well as careful note of their behavior. For the system to work as expected lay assistants were appointed to keep control over all their activities. Father García wrote in his *Diary* in 1766:

*... Once the service is over all the people gather at the door of the church, and the missionary father takes out a book he carries around with him and reads out a list of people, young and old, belonging to that chapel, family by family; if anyone were found to be missing, the priest inquires into the reasons for this absence, and the person is informed of another chapel where mass will be imparted, so the absentee does not go without confession. It is there the missionary father finds out about the number of deaths and births, and takes note of them. The days following involve a variety of other activities, confessions, communions and news as to any scandal among the members of that chapel, as well as whether the lay assistants are doing their job of reciting prayers,*

*teaching doctrine and chanting the rosary every Sunday, getting people together at the chapel, assisting the sick and procuring a confessor for them, assisting the dying and exhorting them to acts of contrition, helping women in labor and attending baptisms.*

The first churches built by the Jesuits in Chiloé were a far cry from the architectural splendors of today. They were made of wood, with a thatched roof. Several centuries were to go by before the Bavarian priests belonging to the Order of Loyola landed on these beaches and erected buildings of clearly European lines. It was then that the larch tiles came into use, along with steeple-like belfries, the three inner naves, Romanesque columns and the richest of imagery, which can still be appreciated today, and which might well be considered the forerunner of *art naïf*.

Then, too, they were required to curb the excesses of the *encomenderos* and Spanish soldiers in their treatment of the indigenous peoples. Hispanic colonization was brutal, and characterized all over America by the inhuman exploitation of the Indians, the systematic destruction of their beliefs and social organization – so different from the *Pax Romana*, or British imperialism in India – and by a permanent pillaging of their natural resources. In fact, corruption was established in the New World from the very moment the Spaniards landed, something that, despite the number of centuries elapsed, is still felt in most Latin American countries, as though it has somehow infiltrated their genes. *Encomienda*, *reducción*, *mita* or *yaconazgo* were but different names to define an exploitation system that denied the Indians even the most elemental of rights. In Chiloé there were, between 1721 and 1748, 57 *encomiendas* and six Jesuit *haciendas* with Indians at their service, from Lacuy, at the northernmost tip of the island, to Huidad, in the south. Happily for the Chilotes, little of what was produced was exported to Spain, nor was this produce any good to Madrid for financing wars and erecting palaces; if there had been gold or silver, thousands of Indians would have left their lives there, as happened at the cerro Potosí, in today's Bolivia. What importance could a few pieces of timber have for the Hapsburgs and later the Bourbons? This perhaps contributed to the Indians receiving a treatment somewhat more benevolent and humanitarian than others. And the Jesuits – like Father Bartolomé de las Casas – were concerned about the welfare of those primitive inhabitants.

Yet that theocratic world organized into productive communities, with large estates, windmills and *artilugios* – wooden Chilote farm tools – was condemned, though not to disappear, to change hands. For some time now the Company of Jesus had been looked on askance in Europe by certain ecclesiastical authorities and monarchic governments. The first country they were driven out of was Portugal, which was soon to be followed by others. In February 1767, Spanish king Carlos III signed the order to expel the Jesuits from his kingdom and from its overseas territories, which meant the end of this order in Chiloé. There was no specific reason to explain their eviction, and even today historians cannot agree on what caused it. Suffice it to say, however, that the Jesuits had accumulated enormous power and the European governments were envious of the ascendancy this order held among the political classes, which they educated and received confession from; of their conservative attitudes in connection with teaching; of their defense of ecclesiastical meddling in politics, and, what was above all irritating, of their direct dependence on the Holy See. The order likewise had enemies within the Church itself.

Kings are rarely grateful, and if Carlos III of Spain signed the decree expelling the Jesuits from Spanish territory, it is likely he never even considered their monumental work in America. In Argentina, for instance, the Jesuit *estancias* in the province of

Cordoba – Alta Gracia, Candelaria, Jesús María, to mention only the most important – were a model of efficiency and proper treatment, as was San Ignacio, in the province of Misiones. How could a king who never left Madrid – in contrast to the Catholic Kings, who had no fixed residence but roamed the kingdom from palace to palace – be in any way touched by what the Jesuits had achieved in Chiloé, the hardships they had undergone, or the quests of those who had died at the hands of the Indians, like Father Mascardi? All this meant was that for whatever reasons of State, he was required, without consideration, to set his hand to a decree putting an end to an organization that had contributed to cementing the Catholic religion in America.

From 1767 on, the Franciscans took over evangelization in Chiloé, with their activities exactly mirroring the Jesuit circular missions. However, the islanders did not trust them as they had their predecessors. The mark left by the Jesuits on the archipelago is not restricted to its incredibly beautiful churches or its naïf altars and images, but instead, despite the centuries elapsed, has become part of Chilote culture and beliefs. This is true insofar as ethics and religion are concerned, but the education imparted by the Jesuits has also endured, and becomes evident, among other things, in the prevailing low rate of illiteracy.

The lounge where Monsignor Juan Luis Ysern de Arce, bishop of Ancud, welcomes his guests is in fact his library, a sober rectangle replete with books. At last I had before me this man who might well be called legendary and who, by the offices of the Church and by dint of his own keen intelligence, had carried out enterprises successful in their crushing force because this man in the face of hopeless situations had wielded not only the cross but also the sword. Deliberate and unhurried in his speech, this Spanish-born religious man, who had spent most of his life in his motherland, still spoke with that unmistakable Castilian accent, interspersed – as though by gaps hewn by time – with that distinct echo of Chilean discourse. He had been appointed as Bishop in Chiloé in 1974 and it was his clear thinking and accurate sense of modernity that contributed to the island's keeping its identity in this new world, revolutionized by communications, globalized enterprises, sexual revolution, and the irruption of drugs and violence.

"Identity doesn't mean always doing the same but always *being* the same – that way one grows, but is the subject of one's own growth," explained Monsignor Ysern de Arce. "And this means change. When I start to do things that are not a part of me, that I don't understand, and start to do what is dictated by my environment – which also forces my decisions – I no longer have the power to make decisions. I just go with the stream. I am no longer myself. When confronted with these changes Chiloé was in a situation where it might easily have lost its identity."

His voice was quiet, thin, like that of most Chileans. Yet the monsignor had reached this conclusion about identity only after a lengthy stay in Chile, which had at times been far from pleasant. He was born in Valencia, Spain, in 1930 and though I discovered little about his childhood apart from the fact that it was marked by the Spanish Civil War, which came to an end when Ysern de Arce was nine, there is one fact that is a clear signpost to where part of his proverbial wisdom might have come from: he has been a priest for over fifty years, and a bishop for over thirty. His ecclesiastical beginnings were in Grenada, but by 1972 he was already assistant bishop in Antofagasta, in the north of Chile.

These were critical times, precisely because the government elected by the people was Marxist and its President was Salvador Allende, which did nothing to make the relationship between State and Church easier. Yet there was always dialogue between them. The Archbishop of Santiago, an exceptional man, managed to forge ahead with this extremely complex relationship; in fact, Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez mediated on more than one opportunity between the opposition and the government of Allende, convincing them, for instance, to drop National Unified Schooling (ENU), a doubtful educational project as far as Catholic ethics were concerned, to mention only one of his innumerable tasks.

His spirit and a modern vision of the world and the Church dated back many years. His having graduated as a lawyer possibly contributed to broadening his humanistic and legal knowledge, and to providing him with a more complete education, which, for his time, might have been considered revolutionary. During the government of Eduardo Frei Montalva, in the 1960s, he conceived his most daring project: distributing among the peasants the lands that belonged to the Church. This agrarian reform must have enraged the more conservative sectors, accustomed as they were to ancestral landed estates and their feudal administration. There was, however, no stopping Silva Henríquez who, once he had gained authorization from the Pope, distributed the land among the peasants. It was during this time he began to be called “the people’s cardinal”. It was inevitable then, that when Salvador Allende, Marxist and atheist came to power after an impeccably democratic election, the paths of these two men should at some time intersect. The new Chilean President was not unaware that Silva Henríquez was a prelate with a broad conception of the world, poles apart from an Inquisitor out to hunt heretics. It was not surprising, therefore, that the President should listen to the Cardinal on more than one occasion. At senior echelon official events they shared the same seats of honor. This curious relationship between two men with categorically contrasting principles and beliefs somehow prospered. There was discourse, diplomacy and even a few objectives in common. After all, the Cardinal had anticipated the agrarian reform, a task that Allende was to implement later.

The day Salvador Allende was instated Cardinal Silva Henríquez decided to make him a symbolic gift, something far from easy for someone who, apart from being a Marxist and an atheist, was also the member of a Masonic lodge. The Cardinal presented him with a Bible, pointing out he hoped it would be accepted in the spirit it was given.

“How could I not accept it?” exclaimed Allende. “This is the story of the world’s very first revolutionary!”

We have no information, however, as to what Fidel Castro did with the ten thousand Bibles the Cardinal presented him with on behalf of the Chilean bishops when he visited Santiago in 1971.

On September 11<sup>th</sup> the inconceivable happened. The coup d’état led by General Augusto Pinochet was to inaugurate a long reign of terror in Chile and no Chilean will ever forget the macabre scenes at the National Stadium, at Pisagua, or on Dawson Island, in the Magellan Strait, to name only a few of the many detainment centers, which might better be called death and torture centers. Silva Henríquez did not remain aloof. He made public his opinion. “The country is aware that the bishops have done everything in our means to keep Chile within the guidelines of the Constitution and the law, and to avoid a violent outcome such as that caused by our institutional crisis; we therefore entreat you there should be no unnecessary retaliation against the vanquished”. Furthermore, the Chilean Church was not about to remain indifferent to what was happening and decided to become “the voice of those who have no voice”, which, as

might have been expected, sparked one of the many incidents and confrontations between the temporal and spiritual powers. One of the initial measures taken by Cardinal Silva Henríquez, together with a small group of prelates, was to publish an initial statement in the traditional Santiago daily, *El Mercurio*, which belonged to the Edwards family. It is, perhaps, remarkable that the paper's aristocratic proprietors should not have attempted to deter its publication, which speaks well for freedom of expression. The government of Pinochet did everything within its power to prevent it, but as so often has been the case in the course of history, the cross took precedence over the sword.

The tensions between these two powers one year after Salvador Allende was overthrown and put to death reached almost intolerable extremes. But Pinochet ultimately confronted the Church, and his own creed, and was quite aware of the precise boundaries for his government. This did not, however, prevent the Cardinal from mentioning, in April 1974 during his Easter Resurrection homily delivered in the Santiago Cathedral, the death threats he had received. Nobody would have dared to attempt to take the Cardinal's life, for he had great prestige, apart from being the maximum ecclesiastical authority in Chile. Unfortunately this was not the fate of five priests who were assassinated. In September 1973 Catalan priest, Juan Alsina Bustos, was arrested and shot, and his body was found on the banks of the river Mapocho. Terror spread as the system tightened screws even further with the murder of British priest Michael Woodward, French cleric André Jarlan, the Spaniard Antonio Llidó, who went missing after having been arrested by the DINA (the National Intelligence Board), and Chilean priest Gerardo Pobrete.

On several occasions, Cardinal Silva Henríquez came before the maximum military authorities to plead clemency, and respect for human rights. In 1974, in a further attempt to put an end to these excesses, he created the Pro Peace Committee, which, two years later was to become the Vicaría de la Solidaridad (Solidarity Vicariate), an institution that was granted an award by the United Nations. Pinochet must have been dumbfounded. It is not surprising the cardinal was nicknamed "the red bishop".

Around that same time there was another cleric in southern Chile who proved to be made of the same stuff as the Cardinal: Monsignor Juan Luis Ysern de Arce. In 1974, as Administrator for the Calama diocese, during the worst of the brutal excesses perpetrated by the military government, which led to thousands of prisoners, relegates, executions and tortures, he was confronted for the first time in his life with the most supreme of missions, extremely delicate and profoundly Christian: saving lives. How could he be indifferent to the death of those defenseless human beings who had fought only for their ideals and were now falling lifeless before the bullets of shooting squads? How could he sit with arms folded in the face of such brutality, openly repudiating the most basic of Christian principles? He had chosen to be a priest, but this did not preclude his becoming involved, nor did it relegate him to merely pastoral or clerical tasks; nor, did his compassion encompass solely catholic victims, spurning atheists or agnostics. For were they not all children of the same Lord? It was undoubtedly his first crucial decision, and this behavior would characterize him for the rest of his days.

Which, of course, marks a clear contrast with the position adopted only two years later by the Church in Argentina, when a military dictatorship inaugurated State Terrorism, in what the world came to know as the "dirty war". The Church stood unmoved by the disappearance – and, in most cases, death – of citizens, or, worse still, by the murder of people in the religious ranks, from two French nuns and six Palotino fathers, to priests who had left-wing sympathies.

However, this was not to be the position adopted by Monsignor Ysern de Arce. In Calama, in the arid northern desert, atrocities were being committed. He talked, he argued, he beseeched the military authorities to stop the executions, appealing to the Christianity of the members of the Armed Forces, attempting to infuse real Catholicism into these executioners. It must have been a monumentally arduous task, for he could only persuade, seek to illuminate the soul, resort to Christ, confronting normally insensitive, even paranoid, men who were convinced they were carrying out a messianic mission. Yet at no time could he make demands. Ysern de Arce proposed that those under arrest should be given a fair trial, the chance to defend themselves, the opportunity to carry on with their lives, and not simply be mercilessly wiped out, without compassion. There were times when he was successful, while there were others when he failed. But he stood his ground, without giving in, without setting aside the supreme mission God had entrusted him with. And one cannot help wondering whether any of the prisoners who were let off are aware their lives were saved by this priest. Most likely they are oblivious of the fact.

Now, in Chiloé, Monsignor Ysern de Arce had only a year left to bring his assignment to an end, for he had decided to retire at seventy-five. But his achievements had been formidable, right from the time he was appointed Bishop of Ancud in 1974. In Calama he had experienced horror, death, insensibility, rejection of the most basic Christian principals, which led him to hold out a hand to the *relegados* coming to the archipelago in conditions little less than deplorable. As mentioned previously, the Ancud bishopric and the network of priests disseminated all over the Chilote territory provided them with help immediately. But his greatest challenge was probably to assuage the impact globalization and communications were to have on the Chilote population, separating the wheat from the chaff, preparing the people to accept the changes. This would require a modern approach, an open-mindedness both religious and intellectual, diametrically opposed to reactionary movements, a trend which had undoubtedly not characterized the Chilean Church.

“Chiloé was in a situation in which it might easily have lost its identity if it sought to adapt to the change. The problem was how to grow, how to take part in that development firmly, without leaving aside the essence of Chiloé,” said Monsignor Ysern de Arce. “Cultural identity is not preserved by keeping the same habits in dressing or acting, but by doing just what the new trends require.”

Nevertheless, he would need a new tool to make this change viable. The very idea of traveling the length and breadth of this vast archipelago establishing new guiding principles, providing a modern approach to the Church’s mission, was a task well nigh heroic. The Jesuits had done it before him, but in the seventeenth century, making use of the means for travel available at the time, which at best were piraguas with a few oarsmen. But towards the end of the twentieth century traveling around from island to island was still a rigorous undertaking because of the weather, the unpredictable sea, the winds of hurricane force that could blow up when least expected. Added to this, communication would have to be constant and systematic. It was of no use for the bishop to go, for instance, to the group of Chauque islands in an effort to instrument an inevitable change, for he would have had no idea of when he would return there. Nor could he spend his entire time in constant traveling. Since technology and a revolutionary communications system had reached these far-flung areas, there could be nothing better than to make use of them. The Ancud episcopate devised and implemented a network of frequency modulation radio stations which could be picked up even on the remotest of the islands, and where, in addition to the regular programs, the Church would be able to leave valuable messages, intelligent analogies, skillful

comparisons. This was how the *Estrella de Mar* (Starfish) network was created, a system which currently has eight radio stations disseminated around Chiloé.

Radio broadcasting, however, has not always been easy, particularly during the military regime. The military authorities, suspicious and even paranoid, attempted to apply a system of censorship which would not allow the least deviation from their political postulates, and which denied freedom of expression, for they saw enemies posted on every corner. In 1982, the *Carabineros* asked the *Estrella de Mar* network director, Francisco Valiente, to submit the broadcasting schedule prior to going on air. Perhaps they suspected this new - in their ideology, fearsome - communication tool, might in some way be related to the left wing, which in the minds of the military regime was equivalent to the devil. They probably imagined perverse monsters, like Asmodeus, Leviathan or Behemoth - to name only a few of the most prominent devils who were capable of possessing human beings - concealed in the messages broadcast on these radio stations. But the network director demanded that this prior censorship should be requested in writing. Once again, as had happened so often before in history, temporal power confronted spiritual power, and as has so often happened, too, this latter came out victorious. No one dared to make the request in writing.

Monsignor Ysern de Arce had other more pressing concerns. Chiloé had been showing signs of industrialization since the salmon fisheries were first installed in fjords and lakes, and was not unaware that, from the time of the arrival of television and cell phones, Chiloé integrity - at least as it had been hitherto understood - was under threat. It would be no good, from the point of view of strategy or conviction, to cling to former values, to deny the world had changed, refusing to accept the archipelago had become part of globalization and, much less, to try and convince young people of the dire consequences of changes such as these. The truth of the matter was the monsignor believed just the opposite, that the new trends might be beneficial. The first thing he understood was that upholding cultural identity did not mean upholding past traditions and customs.

"In several parts of Chiloé there are people who do, in fact, maintain their identity and are aware they are doing so, and know what steps to take without losing it. But there are others who misguidedly insist on upholding their identity by always doing the same thing, which to a certain extent is also an outrage," he cautions.

With the passing of time, Ysern de Arce's eyes have become translucent, and his left eye does not respond fully to normal ocular movements. However, this in no way hinders his having a lucid vision of reality: he never loses the thread of a conversation, applying flawless, superlatively well-founded reasoning.

"There are some anthropologists who maintain former traditions should be preserved by avoiding changes," he continues. "But they have no right to do this. Nor should they try to stop people relating to others."

Coming from the Bishop of Ancud, these statements are particularly significant, for Chiloé has become a coveted prey for numerous anthropologists - a veritable *bocato di cardinale*. Where else is one to find an island with such an abundance of cultural contrasts, where ethnicity may be upheld to the very end, and where the blame for anything can be laid at the door of the new industries, technology, the avidness of the impresarios, all of which are thus turned into executioners hacking away at the very roots of a people. We will consider later the ideological and economic war launched by Huilliche descendants in seeking to recover the lands the State had promised them, where there is a clear confrontation between new trends and ancestral traditions, between training and development, and ancient feudal customs. The mission undertaken by Ysern de Arce was no easy task in a land where so many antagonisms cohabit, and

where many hold they are the sole owners of the truth. What most alarmed the bishop was, perhaps, the massification process that accompanied the phenomenal change brought about by industry and communications, and which, to his view was capable of swallowing up everything: values, morals, religion.

“During a situation of change,” he points out, “it is extremely important to adopt an attitude of observation so as to know exactly what’s going. And I am not referring solely to external things, but to changes going on inside each human being. It is simply a statement of the obvious to say that nowadays there are a lot of computers, whereas it is not nearly as easy to say what is going on *inside* the people using them.

But his strategy has been based mainly on what he likes to call critical sense, an essential tool to avoid that fearsome massification, which involves an implacable confrontation between two worlds, pivoting dialectically on an axiom: old should not be confused with old-fashioned, or modern confused with progress. However, these revealing visions are not recorded in a bulletin distributed among churches and schools, but are part of the function of the chain of *Estrella de Mar* radio stations, approached in an entirely modern style, normally the absolute antithesis of a sermon.

“To believe, I must be able to discern between the old and the new, and choose the best in each of these worlds. Then I have to know how to choose, and decide what I want for tomorrow, or what I think tomorrow will bring. I know what yesterday was like. Now, instead, these are the things that are happening. This is the job of the Encyclopedia,” he tells me.

The mechanism is, in fact, simple. Teachers at schools set children the assignment of talking to their parents or grandparents about any topic related to their lives or reality. When everything recounted about the past is gathered together, a book-like record is compiled with all that material, which can also include photographs; in the classroom this production will be examined, debated, and evaluated to discover what is right and what is wrong. Ultimately, it should be considered at home, where each family member should make their own contributions and observations. This is not a static, merely didactic exercise, and to ensure it penetrates the minds and lives of the population, the episcopate has allowed the radio stations to perform role-plays with the children themselves about these topics.

“In the face of a topic involving the confrontation of cultures,” he concludes, “this is the way we are reacting.”

The Bishop of Ancud is a busy man, and he did not hesitate to tell me he had little time to spare when I approached him to request an interview. This was no mere excuse, but an absolute truth, for his life is a rosary of good works. One cannot but feel amazed at the way he has held his hand out to the most unexpected sectors, and at how he has so skillfully solved problems normally dealt with by the State rather than the Church. Ysern de Arce has not only encountered the problem of cultural change, but has also had to deal with the possible crisis of Chiloé peasant families as the younger generations gave up life in the country to move to the city and work in the salmon or fishing industries. Hands were needed to cultivate the land, to care for the cattle, to harvest the crops, and many of these peasants found they could no longer make ends meet. Those essential agricultural tasks that for so long had sustained the poor but stable Chiloé economy were under threat, and, in addition to this being detrimental to these people’s financial situation, it could also jeopardize their very identity.



It was then that the Episcopate at Ancud, along with state organizations and the president of the Basque countries in Spain formed a sturdy tripod which was to be the basis for a new economy that could benefit any Chiloé agriculturists who believed in the enterprises. This was, in fact, no paternalistic project where derogatory aspects would inevitably emerge in connection with the peasants, particularly commiserating with their lot, which would mean development, progress and imagination would be supplanted by charity. What this actually involved was something much more daring and unique, which had never been put into practice in Chile: the encounter of two cultures, two lifestyles, to achieve a process not only richly interwoven but financially beneficial. What might happen, for instance, if people from other latitudes, the typical products of urban culture, were to *cohabit* with Chiloé peasants? The idea, put forward under these terms, might seem the very acme of nonsense. What might one group have in common with the other? What kind of dialogue or exchange might such differing personalities engage in? How would they be able to share a single table and partake of the same fare? How could these denizens of another cultural reality live in dwellings not simply modest but downright ramshackle, with no electric light, no toilet facilities, no road to speak of? Monseñor Ysern de Arce, instead, considered this might be an extraordinary experience if the two cultures managed to engender a rich exchange. This would involve making full use of the changes in communication taking place in Chiloé, and of the new training schools, as well as seeking an alliance with local and foreign governments to achieve the required know-how and the funds for this initiative.

As was to be expected, he managed to raise them. And as failure is entirely alien to his vigorous personality, the Chiloé Agrotourism Network – as the project was named – was not only created but turned out to be a great success. This was further evidence of what the bishop had always sustained, that not everything new was necessarily negative. The first revolution was the arrival of cellular phones, which put an end to isolation. The peasants' homes would have to be substantially altered to provide them with minimum comforts, from toilets and electricity to a menu including something other than only typical foods. Not to mention the cultural support required for them to keep up a basic conversation with their guests, and organize activities to keep them busy. It was under such circumstances that these unassuming peasant homes, settled on the slopes of the Chiloé hills, set out to surpass even the best hotels. What contact can one expect with the soil by traveling on a bus packed with tourists, stopping off only infrequently to take photos of the landscape, or to lunch at doubtful restaurants serving so-called typical food, and selling cheap trinkets ostensibly evoking Chiloé culture. This is what is known as “five-hour-tourism”, leaving from Puerto Montt and returning the same day. The bishop's proposal, instead, was something entirely different, where participation was an indispensable element. Imagine for a moment setting off on horseback to explore the hills and forests, giving a hand in rounding up the cattle or doing agricultural tasks; reaching out-of-the-way beaches few people could get to; sharing real Chilote food made from their own produce, like potatoes, artichokes, pork or chicken, prepared by a Chilote housewife. This might not be the desideratum of one who takes pleasure in a lonely stay at the Sheraton, but it is an authentic approach to this powerful land. These enterprises have flourished in Tenaun, in Contuy and in diverse locations in Chiloé, and this additional income from tourists has to some extent eased the peasants' financial straits, for they can simultaneously continue to carry out their usual agricultural tasks.

But there was one last task the Ancud Episcopate would be required to perform: the preservation of what was, perhaps, the most emblematic aspect of Chiloé, not to mention the aesthetic delight it provided. There are over one hundred and forty churches and chapels scattered in the remotest of locations, and each of them, though made of

timber, and despite the damp, the woodworms and the tempests, has managed to remain standing. There is nowhere in the world a collection of sacred buildings responding to an architecture of this nature. The incomparable larch tiles, the steeple belfries, the columned porticos, the ever-present Bavarian style, the mix of indigenous and Baroque imagery all create a curious feeling of strangeness, perplexity, astonishment. Could anyone remain unmoved before the church at Vilupulli? Or the one at Nercón, with its unexpected boxwood maze? Or the pale blue church at Tenaun with its three towers? The list could go on forever, for these delightful places of worship seem to spring up out of the earth, as if by magic, in the most unexpected of places.

Yet this unique wealth was subject to severe risks, for it is costly to maintain and requires permanent repairs. On the last trip I made to Chiloé, the churches of San Juan and San Antonio de Colo had no belfries, facades or other fundamentals because they were under repair. But let us ignore, for a moment, the aesthetic. The churches and chapels on the archipelago are not there simply to attract tourists, however much these latter may enjoy their originality and beauty. They are part of a solid religious system that sustains a large portion of Chilote population, where the presence of the bishop is acclaimed during patron saint feasts. Take, for instance, the celebrations during the Jesus the Nazarene feast on the island of Caguach every 30<sup>th</sup> August. The faithful are counted in their thousands and arrive on tiny boats from myriad points across the archipelago to venerate Christ as His image is carried in arms around the village. The strength of their belief, the sheer devotion of these people, the unity and refuge the crowd provides, the splendor of the liturgy, the presence of the bishop is merely the continuation of the evangelization started by the Jesuits in Chiloé back in the sixteenth century. Some anthropologist might maintain, not without some element of truth, that this religious fervor and its strongly ritualistic accent had its origin in a Mapuche-Huilliche religious ceremony, the *ngillatún*, the practice of which was abandoned during colonial times. It is likely that, being a pagan ceremony, (at least ecclesiastically speaking) all that had to be done was to divert the profound religious sentiment of these Indians towards the new Catholic faith.

These patronal feasts, which multiply amazingly on land and on the islands – the Immaculate Conception, on 8<sup>th</sup> December, is as good as an example as any – are essential to the Ancud Episcopate. The problem is that these age-old churches and chapels, because of their very antiquity and the deterioration caused by the climate and the environment, might have been severely damaged. However, each village, each tiny fishermen's hamlet, is proud of their church, large or small, whether it is the gigantic temple at Quinchao, or some exquisite little chapel on a remote marsh. Monsignor Ysern de Arce understood the ambivalence, in the positive sense of this term, that Chilote churches involved. They were a testimony to the past, a permanent witness to what the Church had done over the centuries for Chiloé, to the prodigious architects and artisans, to the enormous appeal during the patron saint feasts and, perhaps most importantly, to the capacity displayed by the Ancud Episcopate in preserving them. It is doubtless far from easy to keep them standing and in activity, for these are no mere museums but religious epicenters, where masses, weddings, baptisms and burials are performed. Everything, from the lighting to the bells, which can be heard at considerable distances, must be in working order. The Episcopate has not only managed to find the funds required for their maintenance, but has also been instrumental in getting UNESCO to declare them a Heritage of Humankind.

It has been no small task for a man not even Chilean born, who has never lost his Spanish accent, but who is endowed with the same mettle, and identical fortitude as those first Jesuits who came to these coasts seeking to preach the doctrine of Christ.

Perhaps, in his natal Valencia, Monsignor Ysern de Arce never even imagined what life and his faith would have in store for him, or that he would be required to sustain thousands of faithful on a faraway island in the Pacific, helping them in their inclusion in a new world. But Chiloé has been a land of heroes and no one better than their bishop to lead the way.

\* \* \*

# APOCALYPSE

In Chiloé it is customary for people to talk of a *before* and an *after*, as though a cataclysm might have divided their world into two distinct eras. Which, as we will see, is what in fact happened. Since times immemorial there have been earthquakes in Chile, often amazing in their degree of severity, and claiming dreadful numbers of victims. Chileans have, however, accepted this fury spewing up from the very entrails of the earth as a part of their *modus vivendi*, as have most of the peoples living in the proximities of the Andes. Seismic activity occurs practically daily, and it is quite usual to feel a home shaking under one's feet sometimes for only a fraction of a second, without this seeming to cause any kind of alarm, for people eventually get used to it. Though this may sound obvious, it is undoubtedly true there is a world of difference between imagining what an earthquake feels like, and actually being there in the midst of one. I must confess that I experimented my first contact with this kind of catastrophe as a child, not against a real backdrop, but in the cinema: I have never been able to forget that moment in *San Francisco* when Jeanette McDonald and Clark Gable walked out of a music-hall, to be almost immediately caught up in an earthquake. At a time where children had no virtual or electronic reality to relate to, or realistic games on a screen to bring them close to this type of experience, this movie was intensely revealing, and I remember sitting mesmerized, riveted to my seat, watching as buildings collapsed, seeing the horror of yawning crevasses in the streets swallowing up passersby, and trying to understand the fire that eventually reduced the city to rubble. Unfortunately, though, these images are not simply science fiction, but reproduce with remarkable realism what so often happens in these cases.

The first historically (though not seismologically) recorded earthquake in Chile was in 1575 and there were several recorded during the eighteenth century. Strangely enough, though, nothing has been written about them. But in the nineteenth century, specifically on February 20<sup>th</sup> 1835, an earthquake of colossal proportions shook the city of Concepción and the port of Talcahuano, sowing destruction in its wake. As fate would have it, a British seaman, Robert Fitzroy was present on this fateful occasion, and the naturalist, Charles Darwin, of the same nationality, sailed into Concepción on March 4<sup>th</sup>, only a few days after the cataclysm had taken place. He set his impressions down in writing in *The voyage of the Beagle*.

*After viewing Concepcion, I cannot understand how the greater number of inhabitants escaped unhurt. The houses in many parts fell outwards; thus forming in the middle of the streets little hillocks of brick work and rubbish. Mr. Rouse, the English consul, told us that he was at breakfast when the first movement warned him to run out. He had scarcely reached the middle of the courtyard, when one side of his house came thundering down.. He retained presence of mind to remember, that if he once got on the top of that part which had already fallen, he would be safe. Not being able from the*

*motion of the ground to stand, he crawled up on his hands and knees; and no sooner had he ascended this little eminence, than the other side of the house fell in, the great beams sweeping close in front of his head. With his eyes blinked, and his mouth choked with the cloud of dust which darkened the sky, at last he gained the street. As shock succeeded shock, at the interval of a few minutes, no one dared approach the shattered ruins; and no one knew whether his dearest friends and relations were not perishing from the want of help.*

That 20<sup>th</sup> February Darwin was in Valdivia, where the earthquake lasted no more than two minutes, and did not have the devastating consequences of the one that struck Concepción. But his account of what he saw and felt is, as usual, masterful.

*A bad earthquake at once destroys our oldest associations: the earth, the very emblem of solidity, has moved beneath our feet like a thin crust over a fluid; -one second of time has created in the mind a strange idea of insecurity, which hours of reflection would not have produced*

In the twentieth century the city of Chillán was shaken by an earthquake on January 24<sup>th</sup> 1939. Though the quake did not reach maximum intensity on the Richter scale, its outcome was thirty thousand dead, and Chileans perhaps believed that for the rest of the century there could be nothing worse. They were grossly mistaken: Apocalypse was only twenty-one years away. On Sunday, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1960, towards three in the afternoon, Chile suffered the worst earthquake ever in its long seismic tradition or in the history of seismology. The earthquake, which was followed by the lethal gigantic tidal waves, known as *tsunamis*, reached 9.5 on the Richter scale. Simply for the sake of accuracy, it might be mentioned that the epicenter, that is, the heart of the quake, was located 38.2 S, 72.6 W, geographic coordinates no seismologist will ever forget. Though the city most affected was Valdivia, Chiloé suffered the consequences not only of the earthquake and the ensuing tidal wave, which caused the archipelago to sink two meters, of the fires that broke out everywhere, but of the infamous indifference of the government of Santiago, which, in terms of assistance, left the island largely to look out for itself. The old historical debt caused by the island's having refused to seek independence from Spain was once again accruing interest.

At dawn on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, Castro felt a tiny tremor, which nobody attached any importance to. After all, it was Sunday and the city slumbered, as did the rest of the archipelago. On Saturday evening the Chilotes had no doubt drunk *chicha* and wine, danced to the sound of waltzes and *cuecas* and made love as they were wont to do. Who could be concerned about what was to them no more than a quiver, one of the many they were so used to. In Castro it went practically unnoticed. What everyone was unaware of was that there had, in fact, been an earthquake in Concepción and Chillán, to the north. They heard about it the following morning when the radio – frankly erratic in the service it provided – broadcast the news. But it was quite far away, and sparked a ripple of condolences and solidarity, rather than fear. What risk could this involve to Chiloé, this remote island completely cut off from the continent. Besides, it had already happened. It was a Sunday, and, after several weeks, the sun had come out. Also, an age of prosperity seemed to be dawning in Castro: the concrete pier had been completed – a

task that had taken a full ten years – and the old Customs building had been remodeled. The town would at long last have a port of its own with suitable facilities, which would provide the means for a significant increase in trade. That Sunday, too, was a long-awaited football tournament, with teams from different neighborhoods, to be held in the stadium on *calle* Freire. However, there was still something that needed modernizing: the fire engine at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, which needed a turbine to make the water pump work. There would be time enough for that.

It was an omission that proved to be fatal and contributed to the destruction of Castro.

Sunday began with the inevitable mass, attended by many faithful, who perhaps drowsily listened to the priest's sermon, while letting their imagination roam over the alternatives the football match might provide. There were, of course, some comments about the earthquake in Concepción and Chillán, but in 1960 communications in Chiloé were about as modern as in the age of cavemen. It was a forgotten island, practically without paths, church-mouse poor, and its only communication with the world was the radio – an artifact not all Chilotes owned – and the telegraph. What everyone was unaware of was that the earthquake was not an isolated event, but that it formed part of a fearsome serpent gliding south and destroying everything in its path.

But that Sunday many were still suffering from the aftermath of the night before, with the inevitable excesses in beverages and succulent rib-steaks, not to mention the piano at the *Palace* which still resounded in the ears of some of the night revelers. The rain had stopped, the sun was coming out and a temperature of ten degrees Celsius, at that time of the year, was practically tropical. Mass at the Franciscan or evangelical church, and songs by Elvis Presley and Paul Anka that the Chilote radiobroadcasting so often aired mingled with the news of an earthquake, many miles north, and the listeners little suspected what they were to undergo that very same day. For, after all, there was to be a football match, and no one felt it should be rescheduled because of the news coming over the radio.

Despite the festive climate, the sun and the football, some people made their way to the FACH (Chilean Air Force) offices, on *calle* Piloto Pardo, where the only radio transmitter worked, operated by *Señor* Pino, in search of more information about what was happening in Concepción and Chillán. At ten to three in the afternoon a radio signal was received from Puerto Montt, two hundred kilometers away: a violent earthquake, the most virulent anyone could remember, was destroying the city. Buildings were collapsing, people were scattering terrified, fleeing in search of open spaces; absolute chaos reigned. We cannot know the reaction of that handful of people gathered round the ancient radio transmitter, but it shouldn't be too hard to imagine. To their terror, they had discovered the earthquake was moving southwards and would not take long to reach Chiloé. But how long? Half an hour, two hours, in the middle of the night? Perhaps they simply crossed themselves and stood in silence, as so often happens at the first impact of news that can change our lives forever. Maybe some of them were clear-headed enough to rush out into the street shouting, seeking to warn as many people as possible to prepare for the worst, to get everyone to evacuate the buildings and go to the main plaza. How difficult to grasp this passing of time, feeling powerless to stop it. Ten minutes later, at three in the afternoon, the Apocalypse tore into Castro.

The first uncommonly fierce shudder lasted but a minute and fifteen seconds. It was enough to bring down the cement edifices on *calle* Blanco – and throughout the entire city: they fell like domino pieces, burying dozens of townspeople under the rubble. The wooden houses were able to withstand it longer; yet many of them, settled on the mountain slopes, came away from their foundations and slid down towards the

sea. Which explains why some of the people from Castro appeared floating in the fjord on portions of housing. At the football stadium, where a match was underway, terror paralyzed all those present. The players threw themselves face down, and clung to the grass, while the land contorted and undulated as though someone were brusquely spreading out a sheet. No less aghast were the spectators on the creaking wooden bleachers, who did their best to keep their seats.

The brand new pier, which it had taken ten years to build, and which anticipated financial prosperity for Castro collapsed, and the Customs building did likewise.

It was then a most unusual phenomenon took place, perhaps as a direct consequence of this Apocalypse. Birds flew around squawking wildly, and dogs howled uncontrollably in the streets. It was as though they instinctively understood that the natural order of things had been broken and were exteriorizing their fear, their panic. The *σωφροσύνη*, or *sofrosine*, in other words what to the Greeks meant balance, had been broken. The animals had become the most primeval symbols of the lost order. Terrified, the people of Castro turned their eyes towards the church of San Francisco, facing the Plaza de Armas, to make sure it, at least, still remained standing: the two steeples swayed crazily, making people huddle up in the middle of the plaza, fearing the worst. The old church, however, did not collapse, but valiantly withstood the assaults and the aftershock that followed as though it had been built of some magically malleable material. This was unfortunately not what happened with the San Martín evangelical church, which caved in as soon as it had been evacuated.

It would be tedious to enumerate the succession of cave-ins; suffice it to say there were only a handful of buildings that remained standing or were not severely damaged. Statistics point to no less than seven hundred homes destroyed. Ancient photos of the time show buildings with pitifully gaping walls showing inner rooms, as though this were some theatrical stage. This is exactly what happened to the Hotel Luxor, an erstwhile refuge for politicians and prosperous businessmen, the walls, woodwork and timbers of which were bared to the elements. *Casa Díaz*, a Norman style mansion, erected in a strategic point of the city, where *Hostería de Castro* now stands, was cut off from the street by a fearsome gaping hole that threatened to swallow anything approaching it.

The aftershocks, which are the earth tremors or shudders that follow on the heels of an earthquake, did not provide respite for the Chilotes, and were no less terrifying, reaching seven on the Richter scale, a figure eloquent to say the least, and capable of demolishing an entire city.

As though these awesome tremors, or the dust from those streets which had not yet been paved, or the noise of buildings crashing to the ground, or the agitation of terrified animals were not enough, Castro was still to face what was to be, arguably, the worst of its trials. The wood-fired ranges and burning braziers, which had been keeping the islanders' homes warm, were overturned by the jolting, and started terrible fires that the fire engine at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company was in no condition to fight. The timber homes blazed like straw, and there was no way to put out the conflagration. For three days and three nights the city burned, until a fine drizzle contributed to putting out the flames. From Dalcahue, Chonchi, Llau-Llao, the peasants and public servants marched gamely towards Castro to learn what had become of their relatives. It was a march towards desolation. With no communications or electrical power, Chiloé had been abandoned to her fate, cut off from the world. The walk towards Castro, no matter the angle, provided a gruesome vision. In Tocoihue, a hill caved in, burying several families. In Chepu, a gigantic wave burrowed five kilometers inland, entire forests sank, leaving no trace of any trees. In San Juan, a cemetery sank beneath the surface and still today, depending

on the tide, crosses sometimes emerge from those murky waters. But those marching towards Castro cared little about muddy roads, the penetrating cold, or the aftershocks. As night fell, the horizon reflected a reddish flicker, different from the red tinted clouds of Chilote sunsets: it was Castro blazing, and the flames lighted up the overcast sky.

At five in the afternoon the tidal wave reached Castro, where the effects were less tragic than in Ancud and Cucao, which were practically flattened by the *tsunami*. A profound fjord protects the town from the assault of formidable waves, but the tide crept up slowly and engulfed most of the port. In the lower areas, the pressure of the water was more than those ancient wooden dwellings and palafittes could resist, and they were simply crushed or swept off their building piles. Abandoned by fate, they floated desolately in the fjord.

Only a few days after the earthquake, the battered population was laid prostrate by an epidemic of influenza, a situation made even worse by an invasion of lice that meant everyone had to be sprayed with combative fluid. It was not, fortunately, the smallpox epidemic of 1870, followed by a wave of exanthematic typhoid, which terminated the lives of thirty percent of the Chilote population. At that time, the inhabitants were made to burn down their homes and properties deliberately to prevent the spread of any plagues.

One of the problems after the earthquake was that the hospital had been razed to the ground and there was nowhere to provide assistance to the sick and injured, whose numbers were increasing as new contingents streamed in from the interior; the Industrial School was turned into a hospital and the few doctors in Castro were on their feet night and day attending to patients.

It was as though Coicoi-vilu and Tentén-vilu, those two ancient serpents of Chilote mythology, were again at loggerheads, locked in their eternal struggle and caught up in a recurring cycle to perpetuity. Perhaps the clearest image of this clash between good and evil, between survival and death, was provided at the time of the 1960 tidal wave. The Chacao channel, which links the archipelago's inner sea to the Pacific Ocean, a narrow strait only two and a half kilometers wide, and struck fear into the hearts of Spanish navigators because of the strength of its currents, was literally left dry when the waters recoiled and gathered to form that gigantic wave. Paradoxically, it was as though, for the first time, Chiloé and the continent were forming part of a single territory, with no insularity, no ominous channel, no serpents locked in perpetual battle. Yet it was for no more than a fleeting instant. The huge mass of water that rushed up the Chacao channel was apocalyptic, and pointed to a stark reality that would never end. And that May 22<sup>nd</sup> victory went to the mighty Coicoi-vilu, a fact that helps to prove that Chilote beliefs are far from belonging to an apparently primitive culture. This serpent *is* the sea that swallows up the land, and it has been thus in Mapuche-Huilliche belief since the time of Creation.

There was yet another shock to come, but this time not from the land but from its people. After the earthquake Chiloé had remained stranded, entirely isolated from the mainland. Heretofore, one might have spoken of insular or cultural isolation, but now it was another kind of solitude, one imposed by nature and by no other than the central government in Santiago. With communications down, ports destroyed, roads unusable, bridges practically disintegrated, no landing strips for large aircraft, and the railway that would never again be put to use, the archipelago was left to its own devices. A plane flew over Castro during the afternoon of May 22<sup>nd</sup> to inform the central government of the extent of the damages, the sole connection the Chilotes were to have with the outside world for days to come. Imagine the days following the earthquake, specifically May 25<sup>th</sup>, when a free edition of the *La Cruz del Sur* daily was circulated among the



population, who only then began to comprehend the magnitude of what had happened in the south of Chile. When would they receive aid, food, medicines, and the basics they were so in need of, considering nobody had made contact with them? They must have felt so forlorn, so desperately alone. The few news items coming from the Chilean capital amazed them: no mention was even made of Chiloé, as though the country came to an end in Puerto Montt, which was, in fact, what some people seemed to believe. One would have thought there had never been a cataclysm on the archipelago. It was, strangely, the Chilean Navy that went into action, distributing food rations and sending out doctors to care for the sick.

The situation, however, had become intolerable. People had lost their homes and were sleeping wherever they could. The *Plaza de Armas* in Castro had become a dangerous rubbish dump, a focal point for epidemics, and the bust of general Bernardo O'Higgins, Liberator of Chile, was applied to more pressing functions: it was decapitated and the head was used for carrying water. It was the foreign press that revealed to the world the tragedy of Chiloé, the way they had been abandoned by the authorities of Santiago, the utter destruction of Castro. Just as a team of British researchers stunned millions of television spectators with their documentaries on hunger in Ethiopia in the *eighties*, it was US television that showed the horror of the archipelago, where in Ancud alone two thousand persons had died.

Only then did international aid begin to reach the island.

Across the centuries Chiloé mythology has proved to be endowed with prodigious wisdom. The two serpents – of land and sea – had a profound significance, conveyed by oral tradition from generation to generation, undoubtedly as a response to an unquestionable truth about catastrophes. The soil could not be absent in the culture of the archipelago. The earthquake in Chiloé, though exceptionally high in intensity on the Richter scale, was, however, not the worst ordeal the island had undergone: in these remote regions on the Pacific coast, the power of the sea can be overwhelmingly lethal, for here earth tremors are often accompanied by those dreaded *tsunami*, which are gigantic waves that start to take shape in the middle of the ocean, and advance towards the coast at the speed of lightning. With sizes ranging between eight and twenty meters in height, their power of destruction is different from that of the earthquake, for they will stop at nothing, whether lives or edifices. Perhaps this account by a US Navy officer, L.G. Billings, will provide some insight into the doom they bring in their wake; Billings was on board the coal-fired steamship *Watersee*, a nostalgic vessel with side wheels and a single slender funnel. The vessel, anchored at the northernmost tip of Chile, in the port of Arica - at the time the property of Peru - endured this cataclysm on the afternoon of August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1868.

After a violent tremor, the city was wrapped in a gigantic cloud of dust; as it slowly settled Billings was shocked at what he saw, for the prosperous, lively town he had known was reduced to a pile of rubble. He had a lifeboat let down from the deck of the ship to save a few of the survivors who had swarmed onto the pier, desperately seeking aid. Suddenly, however, the sailors saw an immense wave advancing threateningly towards the shore, where it broke like mighty thunder, killing the thirteen crew members on the lifeboat, as well as those crowding on the pier. In the blink of an eye everything had been devoured by that enormous mass of water. The sea then just as suddenly withdrew, leaving the *Watersee* lying on the sand, until another tsunami slammed out of nowhere, making the boat twist and reel as if it were a cork. It was as

though all the laws of nature had been demonically flouted. When the sea eventually quieted and the crew plucked up enough courage to go out on deck to take a breath of fresh air, the spectacle before them was well nigh macabre. On a mountain presiding over the city, the earthquake had uncovered hundreds of tombs. The dead stood vertical, as though contemplating the sea, and that handful of ships that had survived the earthquake. They thought the horror was over, but that same night they were again caught unawares by a third tsunami. There, on board the *Watersee*, and despite the darkness, they suddenly made out a phosphorescent mass, which, though apparently not too large at first sight, slowly turned into a racing, threatening, ever-increasing menace. It was the worst of them all. They watched powerless as the monstrous wave overwhelmed them, swallowing up the boat, sinking and shaking her as though she were no more than a nutshell adrift on that dreadful sea, dragging her through water and sand. But the old vessel, the *Watersee*, managed to surface, and the crew were again able to breathe. Other vessels, like the *Fredonia*, sailing under the US flag, were dragged up by the wave and smashed against the cliff, and the entire crew perished. The following morning they discovered the sea had washed them three kilometers inland, which literally meant they had been carried over the masts of two merchant ships. Their vessel ended up in a valley, by the railway leading to Bolivia. Of Arica's fifteen thousand inhabitants, only a few hundred survived.

The ordeal of L.G. Billings provides a terrifyingly precise idea of what happens during a tidal wave, and the coast of Chile has frequently been assaulted by these *tsunamis*. Chiloé, that day in May 1960, was unable to elude this curse, and one of the most harshly punished places was Cucao, on the western coast of the island. Divine Providence dictated that the cataclysm should have happened during the day, and a Sunday at that, when all the inhabitants were gathered at a single point. Exequiel Álvarez, the entrepreneur and gold-digger mentioned in a previous chapter, remembers that afternoon with amazing accuracy, though he was only eleven.

"The day of the earthquake I was playing football with other kids, by the Cucao chapel," he remembers. "We felt the first tremor, and unusually virulent it was, too, and everyone came out their houses looking for open spaces. That first impact was so strong that some of the houses collapsed. Of course, we had no idea that the worst was yet to come."

It is wonderful how life and death so often depend on random events, on providential occurrences, or on an unbelievably well-timed presence. That afternoon, only twenty minutes after the severest tremor, one of the boys in Cucao galloped to the beach, as though intuitively sensing a threat, as if some strange foreboding had driven him in search of the sea. What he saw brought his stomach to his throat. The waters had begun to draw back, as though sucked up by dark underground forces, leaving hundreds of meters of the seabed uncovered. He realized immediately that the epilogue to this fateful retreat would be a monumental, devastatingly powerful wave. He rushed frantically towards Cucao, screaming "The sea! The sea!" It is likely few explanations were required, for that Huilliche people had a historical memory of cataclysms, and Coicoi-vilu was a part of their genetic make-up.

The entire population set off at a run for a hill at the entrance to Cucao, not too high, but sufficiently so to shield them from that maritime wrath. Crowded around the summit and the slopes they watched helplessly as an incredibly immense mass of water rose up and rushed toward the beach. Experience cannot be conveyed and we can, therefore, but imagine, or perhaps guess at what the inhabitants of Cucao felt at the time, but this can be no more than an approach, without the horror of actually living through it. The wave eventually reached land, with its unavoidably deadly

consequences. The houses on the River Cucao, which flows into the Pacific, as well as the ancestral chapel Darwin had visited, were swept into the swirling sea. The town, viewed from these heights, was entirely submerged. The profusion of trees trailing off towards Punta Huentemó completely disappeared, and incalculable tons of sand fell on the underground gold deposits. These people, perched at the summit of the hill, stood powerless as they watched everything that belonged to them disappear under those waters, with a desolation akin, perhaps, to that felt by people during World War II when they saw the city where they had lived and worked reduced to rubble in an air attack before their very eyes.

At times, an individual tragedy is more moving than rattling off a certain number of victims, which ultimately are no more than a figure. Anna Frank and her tragedy are more poignantly etched on our hearts than countless anonymous victims. There is some disagreement as to how many people died in Cucao that afternoon in May. Many hold there were only three deaths: two children in the village of Rahue, destroyed by the tidal wave, and a young girl who had set off on horseback towards Punta Huentemó and had stopped to look for shellfish under the stones and sand.

That afternoon the young Indian girl, who was only eighteen, had left Cucao on horseback on her way to Punta Huentemó, that huge mountainous peninsula jutting out into the Pacific like a knife. She rode slowly along the beach, probably savoring that oft traveled landscape. It was simply another ride, one more in a life spent riding on horseback across land she knew like the back of her hand. But now that land suddenly started to tremble, which no doubt forced her get down and soothe her horse, which, like most animals, can instinctively sense danger, and the supernatural. Then she must have noticed how the sea was drawing back, but we have no way of knowing whether she suspected what was to come, in other words, that a gigantic wave would engulf the beach. We can but imagine her despair and terror as the natural order of things shattered before her, her desperate attempts to flee from this deadly plain. She could do nothing, and soon must have realized she was trapped, doomed. Perhaps she galloped crazily towards the forest, towards the mountains, but time was running against her, and the speed of the water was infinitely faster. The oversize wave eventually devoured her.

It is worth remembering that in 1960 Cucao was entirely isolated, its only available access provided by crossing lake Huillinco, weather permitting, for the wind from the Pacific tossed the waters into towering waves. Then, there was another lake to cross, the Cucao, which required a journey of several hours. The gravel road, as we know it today, did not exist. For an entire day and night the survivors waited for help, shivering with cold, shaken by the aftershocks and without a bite to eat, for all their victuals were gone. The animals had been washed away by the sea and their plantations had been devastated. Help finally came in the form a helicopter that landed two days later at Punta Huentemó bearing the governor of Chiloé, and bringing food and medicines. Help continued to arrive during the days that followed, though some of the town-dwellers complained it was not fairly distributed and there was overt favoritism.

The indifference of the Chilean government, and of some official institutions, financially speaking, no doubt comes as a surprise, for they any aid to help Cucao inhabitants build new homes or rebuild the remains of what had once been their homes. All that was forthcoming was a loan instrumented through the Housing Corporation, payable over twenty years.

Paradoxically, the cataclysm in Cucao brought some benefits with it, something hard to imagine after such a scene of destruction. Lotte Weisner, in her *Cucao, tierra de soledades*, (Cucao, Land of Loneliness) provides a good example.

*A tidal wave benefited the Quilán Estate, for it invaded the forests and tore up the trees, which would eventually make it easier to clear the lands.*

*In this area, in the south of the district, the sea whipped up waves over 15 meters high, invading the fields in the interior and cutting through to the wooded lands. There it tore up trees, bushes and everything it found in its path. All these lands cleared by the sea were thus prepared for planting, and about 300 hectares of “pampa” were gained in the process. Curiously, only a short time later these new fields had become verdant pastures with grass and white clover growing where they had never been sown.*

The cataclysm also contributed another unexpected benefit, the spontaneous appearance of a twelve hundred meter landing strip close to the beach, which ironically enough, to some extent put an end to the isolation of Cucao, at least as far as basic necessities and emergency medical supplies were concerned. It seems little less than a miracle that from the chaos of that tidal wave, a neat runway should have emerged where small aircraft could land. Today, however, there is nothing left of it: nothing can endure on that beach punished by ferocious winds that erode down to the very foundations of the land.

There were places in Chiloé where the sea was more compassionate, in particular on the eastern coast facing the volcanoes and the Andes cordillera, and sheltered by the islands and the Corcovado Gulf, without that ominous exposure to the sea, so characteristic of the island’s western coast. Quellón is the southernmost town on the island, and also felt the impact of the earthquake. Towards 1962, it was far from being the Chilote port displaying most activity, as it is today: there were no salmon fisheries and no industries to speak of. It was but the last of the southern frontiers, for beyond it there was nothing but the desolation of thousands of uninhabited islands. Those who lived through the earthquake are now elderly, but their memories of it seem to have become clearer over the years, for they are apparently able to remember ever tremor, every detail, every action they undertook.

Doña Isabel works at the Quellón municipal library, one of the few concrete buildings in the harbor. She has a particularly clear recollection of that afternoon in May 1960, for she was twenty-two, and married with a small son. As they did every Sunday, the family had gathered for lunch, with the unfailing Chiloé *curanto*, a typical island ceremony. They had gathered at her home, no more than one block from the sea, and facing onto the harbor.

“The first tremor left us open-mouthed,” she remembers. “At first, the idea of an earthquake is difficult to take in. But for some reason survival instinct soon automatically takes over. The first reaction is to rush out of the house, probably because Chileans have so often been told it is the first security measure to observe. I snatched up my son and ran blindly out into the street, desperately seeking an open space.”

Strangely enough, once out in the open, their first impulse was to flee towards the sea, as though it might provide a refuge for them against this enraged land, spasmodically tearing open glaring gaps all around them. The land was undulating fearsomely, as though someone were spreading it out like a sheet. Isabel sought to reach the sea: all she had to do was go down to the beach and climb aboard the first vessel she encountered. But there were others who had done just that and, from the coast, the view was desolating. The boats had started to cross the water aimlessly, crazily, and the tide had started to rise. What was she to do? How was she to decide in a split second the way to save her life – and that of her son? It was, once again, popular wisdom that

prevailed in the face of the ancestral threat of Coicoi-vilu: the sea might become the worst of shelters, for there would most likely be a tidal wave. Isabel, among all the confusion and panic, heard those undeniably accurate arguments and promptly dismissed the idea of trying to reach the sea. She would have to make it to the mountains, for the enemy was not Tenten-vilu, the earth serpent, but her detested rival, the water serpent.

Despite the wrinkles creasing her forehead, *doña* Isabel is moved by the mere memory of that tragic day, as though time had come to a standstill. They fled to the higher part of the city, to the shelter of the hills, and there she experienced an unanticipated consequence so often present in human relationships. For in the heights of the hills, hostilities among neighbors came to an end, no longer was there rancor or rivalries.

“We had to live together, friends and enemies alike,” she told me, “and the earthquake taught us a wonderful lesson in this sense,” confesses Isabel. “We lived only on the absolute basics for fifteen days, sharing the hens we killed to eat. And what is even more surprising, when the aftershocks came – you know, when the earth goes on trembling once the earthquake was over – we’d hug each other trying to reassure those around us. There were never again any differences among us.”

The earthquake laid waste to the island of Chiloé, where entire fishing hamlets were practically obliterated. Other places managed to resist, as happened in Chonchi. Teresa Vera, the owner of *El Antiguo Chalet*, was baking a cake in the kitchen, to serve for the traditional *onces* or elevenses, which is the name Chileans give to teatime. The enormous house, perhaps because of its impeccable construction quality, and the nobility of the timbers used in building it, remained standing. However, half the splendid garden that descended the ravine to the sea sank into the Lemuy fjord, producing a significant change.

“Before I used to be able to walk back home along the beach,” she told me one evening. “Now there is no longer a beach, because the sea swallowed it up. It took me several years to get used to my new small garden, which got considerably smaller after the earthquake.”

There were other cities on the island where the devastation was overwhelming. As already mentioned, though the fearsome quake destroyed homes and bridges, this was not the worst part of the ordeal the Chilotes were forced to endure. The sea was their main enemy and the villages looking out onto the sea – which are fortunately not too many, for most of them face onto the inner sea, far from the effects of the *tsunami* – were the most severely punished. The macabre paradigm of destruction and horror was enacted at Ancud, looking hopelessly out onto the Pacific Ocean. And, while a large portion of the town’s population was at the dilapidated airport, suitable only for the landing and take-off of small aircraft, where there was an aviation festival, there were numerous small fishing boats out in the bay. Many people remained in the city, and the most fortunate had left for the country. When the earthquake occurred, the city suffered the same fate as Castro, mirroring its panic. The structure of the old church opposite the *Plaza de Armas*, unable to withstand the shaking, cracked, which led to its subsequently being demolished. The mistake of the people of Ancud was to believe the danger came from the land: terrified by the aftershocks and the gaping cracks in the roads and pathways, they chose to sail out to sea on whatever kind of vessel they could find. Those living in neighborhoods close to the seashore never even imagined what was to happen. Four gigantic waves spawned somewhere in the middle of the ocean advanced at incredible speed – between a hundred and two hundred kilometers an hour – towards the ancient Spanish bastion, founded precisely because it sat astride the Pacific, and could thus avoid the tides and currents in the archipelago. When the first wave roared

into the bay it literally sucked up the water close to the shore as so often happens to swimmers when a wave of large proportions is forming and the current drags them forcefully towards the mass of water.

Just that, but in superlative proportions, was what took place that afternoon in May in the bay of Ancud. Dozens of vessels were sucked up and dragged up into the wave that burst on the town. But before bursting it dried out the sea bed, as though there had never been any water there. A Chilean journalist, Patricio Amigo, came to Ancud little after the catastrophe had occurred, and described some of the scenes he saw in a Puerto Montt newspaper.

*Lieutenant Sepúlveda saw the tragedy of “La Gloria”, the Carabineer launch and said that when the sea started to withdraw “La Gloria” acted as a shelter for nine boats, whose occupants climbed onto her. There were about thirty people, but the outgoing current was so strong that “La Gloria” was left high and dry, aground almost two miles from Ancud and just a few blocks from the island of Cochino. The people tried to flee on foot, along the seabed, but there they encountered another trap: the sludge. Lieutenant Sepúlveda and Chief Officer Miguel Urzúa saw the gigantic wave that rushed in against Ancud, engulfing Corporal Miguel Vergara Díaz first of all, and then those thirty people who had gradually been sinking ever deeper into the mud close to “La Gloria”. Corporal Vergara, helmsman on “La Gloria”, was the father of eight children.*

Entire neighborhoods, like La Arena and El Castillo, were swept away by the sea, with not a trace of them left. Successive waves, smaller in size but no less lethal, destroyed anything still standing. It was calculated that two thousand people died that day in Ancud. What made matters worse, and caused even more deaths was the headlong exodus by the spectators viewing the aviation festival at the Ancud airport, not because they feared for their lives, for they were on a promontory far from the ocean, but because they feared for the lives of their loved ones and friends. They went down into the city after the first huge tremor only to encounter death in the form of an implacable sea. One of the pilots participating in the aviation festival was in mid-flight when the earthquake shook the ground beneath him and he watched, powerless, as a cloud of dust emerged from the earth, and people ran towards open spaces, while the sea drew back, and then... progressive and absolute destruction. Journalist Patricio Amigo also provides a personal view of what happened, a witness which was to become one of the most valued testimonies that have endured over time.

*I do not have the words to tell all I have seen. Ancud once had ten thousand inhabitants, and after scouring the entire city, I cannot say with certainty that even fifty percent has remained. What is today an enormous stretch of beaches was but forty-eight hours ago a town with hundreds of houses. The village of La Arena has disappeared as if by magic. There is no trace of El Castillo. There are roofs floating in the channel. The sea is washing up cars and trucks it swallowed up by the dozen. The enormous cathedral is on the point of collapsing. Its metal armature is sticking out like the arthritic bones of a giant in agony. The sea reached this building as though led by the devil. Many houses located close to the cathedral are now on the beach. Not to*

mention Pudeto.<sup>1</sup> The great Colonization Fund building was entirely uprooted and traveled along the channel, splitting open anything that got in its way. It was this building that cut off the Pudeto bridge. A van passing close to the Colonization Fund building braked to avoid running over a woman and was caught in the cracks in the road. This formed a roadblock and the sea carried off thirty-six vehicles.

As I walk through the streets of Ancud, I ponder on what has happened here. Among the rubble, in the streets, stuck to the walls, are pieces of jaibas<sup>2</sup> and fishes, seaweed and oysters, all of which died when the sea hurled them against the earth.

I found it all hard to believe, but have spoken to the survivors. They lived behind the cathedral, in a new house made of timber. Their surname is Andrade. They are to all appearances crazy: they laugh, they cry, they make bizarre statements. They were set down on the island of Cochinos, two and a half miles from the coast where the swirling waters dragged their house, which was destroyed when it crashed onto the island. The only one to die was a seven-year-old child, Rafael, who jumped out a window while the house was pitching around in the water.

The aftershocks, those lesser shakings following on the heels of an earthquake, continued in Chiloé until June, and calculations indicate there were over two hundred. Each tremor, each noise, each rising of the tide, must have filled these people with fear, and could not but increase their feeling of isolation. In Ancud, for days after the disaster, the sea kept washing up corpses. The general feeling on the island must have been that the little progress they had made, the meager development achieved, had been irretrievably snatched from them. Never again would they have a railway... and their fear in this sense was prophetic. It would be decades before the port of Castro had another pier, and most likely it would never become an active trading center. If the government authorities in Santiago had shown so little interest in helping the islanders, as though they actually belonged to another culture, why would they try to reconstruct an island lacking in economic significance? For this was no Punta Arenas, that pearl on the Magellan strait prior to the Panama Canal, colonized by European pioneers who later became multi-millionaires, like the Brauns, the Behety's or the Menendez', who erected dazzling French palaces, transferring all their interests to the Argentine Patagonia. This was merely an island lost in the southernmost confines of the world, inhabited by Huilliche and Chono Indians, culturally still practically barbarians, which could only be of interest to a handful of anthropologists.

The Chilotes were not mistaken. Transformation came thirty years later, when the salmon industry settled in the area. But, as previously noted, this destroyed their subsistence economy, which was the support for local peasant families, and created lifestyles and behaviors among the young people that led to the emergence of gangs, drugs and consumerism that in no way fitted in with traditional island austerity. And, of course, it led to suicides.

The building of the bridge is yet to come – and is a constant topic of debate. The bridge that is to link the island to the continent, a proposal that keeps many Chilotes wakeful at night. In fact, detractors of the plan believe this would bring more problems than solutions. Suffice it to imagine the invasion of buses crammed with day trippers, who would require an entire parallel industry of fast-food chains, motels of doubtless taste, the inevitable prostitution and night clubs, perhaps even a casino, in short, everything aimed at the loss of the islanders' cultural identity. Many prefer to carry on

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<sup>1</sup> A neighborhood and river close to Ancud.

<sup>2</sup> Chiloé shellfish.

as they are, or better said, as they always have been. Isolated, forgotten, but defending those ancestral beliefs that, ultimately, make them unique, spiritually wealthy beings. Those advocating the bridge provide countless reasons to support their argument; for instance, that as there are no high technology hospitals in Castro or Ancud, patients who are severely ill have to be transferred to Puerto Montt, which means crossing over the Chacao channel in the ferry, all of which involves time, and the possible risk of the patient losing his life on the way.

As we pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1960 marked an after, both emotionally and geographically distinct from their before. For it was not only a change in topography, with the entire Chiloé coast sinking two meters under sea-level, but rather the fact that even today nobody has been able to forget that traumatic experience, perhaps ancestrally accepted in the collective unconscious and expressed in their myths. It is no coincidence these incidents live on in popular memory and can even be said to form part of their beliefs. Their fear is that this might happen again, and that each quiver of the land might end in an Apocalypse.

The main plaza in Valdivia is particularly lovely, especially in summer, when the trees dress in their finest green and perhaps a band strikes up in the fin de siècle gazebo to the delight of passersby. German blood dating back more than one hundred and fifty years flows through the veins of this city, perhaps one of the reasons for the thriving, powerful industries that flourish there. I had the chance to visit the Valdivia of before, in the summer of 1962, when less than two years had elapsed from the earthquake, and the city had little in common then with the great, practically unrecognizable, metropolis of today. I had traveled there from Concepción, on an ordinary train, practically hanging off the steps, for inside it was packed with peasants transporting a variety of animals, from ducks to hens. I had come down from Santiago with Chiloé as my ultimate goal, though I was unaware at the time that I would not get to know the island on that occasion, mainly because I had gone on the trip with scarce financial resources, and much to my regret, had to turn back in Valdivia. In those days it was particularly complicated to get to Chiloé: travelers had to take a boat in Puerto Montt and sail for seven hours to Ancud, and then carry on to Castro by roads at the time still covered in gravel.

After the earthquake Chiloé had been left to its own devices, yet the sight of Valdivia was no less devastating, despite its German blood. I do not remember exactly what the city was like – something inevitable considering the number of decades elapsed – but still etched in my memory are modest wooden houses, entirely different from the edifices that have sprung up in the city today. In those days the south of Chile lived in the most abject poverty, with an unassuming style of construction, which contributed to the uncommonly severe destruction it suffered. Practically all the dwellings were leaning grotesquely sideways, the result of the ferocious tremors, and the population, still prey to the terror of the cataclysm, had so far been unable to reconstruct the city. The only subject of conversation with a foreigner was the catastrophe. The truth is, that in the entire magnitude of the earthquake, it was here it reached the greatest intensity, and here the tidal wave achieved frankly apocalyptic proportions. Valdivia and the ports of Niebla and Corral were the ones most severely punished.

Somewhere among my vague memories, in a time when there were no video cameras or digital photography, I recall a journey on a launch down the Valdivia River,



bound for the sea. And then the fortress at Niebla, defending the entrance to the river, with its cannons aiming at the strait, a historical location, for whoever managed to take that fort would dominate Chile and put an end to the power of Spain. Which was, as we have already seen, the task undertaken by Lord Cochrane, on February 4<sup>th</sup> 1820. At Niebla I boarded another launch to Corral, on the opposite shore, another powerful fortress that would eventually fall into enemy hands. After sailing along a bay-like area, we suddenly came upon the surprising island of Mancera, which once also boasted a Spanish fort, all of which would seem to point to Cochrane's being not only a skillful mariner but also a brilliant strategist, for there is no other explanation for the way he managed to conquer these three locations. The captain of the launch told stories of terrible convulsions, of waves of a size never seen before that impacted on the tiny port of Corral, of desperate flights and inevitable deaths. Though Ancud and Cucao suffered the effects of the tsunami, destruction in Corral has no precedents in the history of Chile. Half an hour after the earthquake, with a precision almost fateful in nature, the first wave appeared on the horizon, the most benign of the waves to come, which engulfed the pier and buffeted the three ships anchored there, the Santiago, the Canelos and the San Carlos until their moorings were loosened and they were tossed adrift on the ocean. Yet this was only the preface to the most indescribable of horrors, a succession of events which the townspeople, seeking shelter in the upper area of Corral, were unable to give meaning to. The sea, roaring with a deafening sound heretofore unknown, began to withdraw, leaving vast areas of the seabed practically dry. In their stupor the terrified locals had no inkling this withdrawal was but the fatal prelude to the second, far from benign, eight-meter-tall wave that advanced on the coast at a speed of two hundred kilometers an hour. How could they confront that foaming mass of water that would not even give them time to find shelter? Hysteria was rife as countless men sought to save their personal effects that had been scattered around the exposed seabed; yet nothing could be done as the tsunami crashed into the town, reducing to dust eight hundred houses scattered around the foot of the hill.

Panic does not normally provide time for intelligent decisions, and people's actions are usually spasmodic, irrational, compulsive, in an attempt to save their lives at any price. Thus it is no surprise that, with the first tremors of the earthquake, a group of fishermen should have fled to their boats with their women and children, in a desperate effort to escape from the fury of the earth, never suspecting the real curse came from the sea. They made it over the first wave, rising and falling with it, but the second relentlessly engulfed them. All of which was witnessed by the people who had fled to shelter in the hills.

But worse was yet to come, for there was a third, truly monstrous, eleven-meter-tall wave that advanced on the town at stunning speed. There was, however, paradoxically, nothing left to destroy: Corral, had, to all practical effects, entirely disappeared. The three ships left adrift foundered on the shore, except for one that appeared on the river Valdivia.

Today there is nothing to be seen in Corral to remind one of that Apocalypse. The old Spanish fort with its defiant cannon still stands. It ironically withstood the worst tidal wave in the history of Chile, though it had stood powerless in the face of a handful of frigates led by a British admiral.

I returned to Corral twice after that first visit in the summer of 1962, both times in the company of my son. Niebla and Corral always had a strange fascination for him, perhaps because of the forts that still remain standing, the accounts of naval combats and terrible tidal waves. Something akin to what I felt in my youth when I reached a tiny fishing hamlet that had been erased from the map, but not from people's memories.

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# THE LAST FRONTIER

It would be no exaggeration to say that the south of Chiloé has a different kind of history, and a landscape increasingly ominous the further south a traveler goes. Not that it is lacking in beauty, but rather there is a certain stark loneliness about it. Corcovado, the volcano at the southernmost tip of the island, is no longer a far-off shape in the distance, but a looming, threatening deity, rising up out of the sea in absolute solitude, and comparable only in strength and mystery to the Koh-ring, on an island in the gulf of Bangkok, as Joseph Conrad describes it in *The Shadow Line*. Then, towards the west, the desolate Pirulil cordillera acts as a barrier against the winds of the Pacific, crashing headlong into the ocean, its coasts inaccessible by land or sea. In colonial times these latitudes received few visitors, with the exception of the Jesuits, ever alert to the needs of their flock. There were only a handful of *encomiendas* in Paildad, Compu, Chadmo and Huildad. Further south was the *non plus ultra*: nothing but sparsely populated, densely forested islands, and The Siren, who seduced seamen and lured them into her rocky lair off the island of Laitec.

Quellón is an unfortunately unprepossessing town founded neither by the Spaniards or the Jesuits, nor even by the pirates that laid waste to the coasts of Chiloé. It is entirely lacking in the glamour Chonchi, Castro and even Ancud enjoy. It is the port where all the fish and seafood produced on the island is sold, and the place where the destruction of the old Chilote culture is most clearly evident. Having no historical roots – at least compared to other townships – it evokes an unequivocal likeness to those old settlements in the American Far West. And, to make matters worse, it has the worst climate in Chiloé, for it rains incessantly.

There is no exact record of the date it was founded, and the only precise fact is that in 1906 the Quellón Timber Distillery, belonging to a German firm from Hanover, was set up in Quellón Viejo, a hamlet slightly further south with no more than six hundred inhabitants. There being no municipal documents to indicate the date the town was founded, the communal authorities determined it was February 5<sup>th</sup>, 1905, the day of the arrival on these coasts of the steamer *Chiloé* of the Braun and Blanchard Company, which belonged to two powerful Patagonian impresarios from Punta Arenas.

Quellón boasts not a single poet or writer. Nor a church to rival the ones in Castro or Achao. Nor a fjord with stilted palafittes overlooking it. Violence emerges gradually, and is to be found in the most unexpected of places. The *Estrella del Mar* radio station was one of the victims.

“They literally sawed the antenna down,” I was told by Carlos Rogel, who has a program on that broadcasting station. “I don’t want to point fingers, but it is obvious our competitors want to get us off the air. We went two days without being able to broadcast our program.”

On the other hand, it is difficult, not to say impossible, to fight against this chain of radio stations, all named *Estrella de Mar*, belonging to the Ancud bishopric. In our talk Carlos shows that enthusiasm, that very same passion he puts into his radio

programs. That midday in January, seated at a table in the *Los Suizos* restaurant on the main street, he also defined himself as a hiker who actually loves to hitchhike, carrying with him his video camera to take shots of anything he finds motivating. The restaurant, I might mention, provides a welcome to a curious mix of diners, from Chilote workers drinking beer to gourmets delighting in a Black Forest chocolate cake, or in Swiss dishes with the unfailing *rösti* potatoes on the side. All of this set against a background of music recreated from the 70's. We walked along the embankment and contemplated the vessels as they leaned on the beach, the low tide in many cases avoiding the need for a dry dock or a mooring pier. When the tide rises seven meters, the ships rise up on the tide, as if by magic.

I might have guessed he would take me to the outskirts of the town to see the landmark that strikes pride in the hearts of the locals: kilometer zero on the Pan-American highway, starting right there on a beach in Quellón and petering out in Alaska. The landmark, though, is actually a forgettable architectural horror, reproducing a Chilote *sacho*, or anchor, with the worst of design in the sixties, in a predictable Nile green color. As we stood there, a small boat with an outboard motor, crammed with peasants, sailed close to the coast on its way to one of the islands.

"Though it may sound unbelievable," Carlos said, "most Chilotes can't swim. It's something almost atavistic. It's not unusual for them to get drunk in Quellón on a Saturday night, and then fall out of the boat and drown on their way back to their island."

The incongruity of an essentially maritime people being unable to swim is one of the mysteries enfolding Chiloé. They are practically in constant contact with the water, not only with the sea but also with the inland lakes, and yet it would seem nobody is aware of how to survive with an exercise as simple as swimming. Cases of people drowning are multiplying alarmingly, with beer, wine or their native *chicha* also contributing to the statistics. As I watched the tiny motor launch packed with peasants returning to their islands, I pondered on the fact that any erratic movement by one of the passengers might cause a tragedy. The crew, however, seemed to have the same confident expression they might wear making their way over dry land.

A well-beaten gravel road took us to Yaldad, a small indigenous community, with its unfailing wooden church. It was a particularly warm, iridescent sunset, one of those only to be seen in midsummer, and infrequent even then. Rather than a minute village, it was more like an outpost of the British Empire, with the natives – in this particular case, the Huilliches, or *men of the south* – devoted to their sea-faring and fishing tasks. Chiloé mythology has it that close to Yaldad lies an enchanted tarn where a young maiden sits and recites poetry on the banks; this unusually romantic attitude makes the waters draw back and watch her, thus forming a river that races towards the sea. Once dry, in the midst of what was once the tarn there appears The Trehuaco (from *trehua* meaning dog and *co*, water), a mythological being similar to a dog, but of singular beauty. He runs towards the maiden to be petted, and then starts howling as the waters once again flood the tarn.

Of course, nobody knows exactly where the tarn lies, and the indigenous population, bent on recovering the lands granted them by the Spanish crown in 1823 by the Tantauco Treaty, after the defeat of the Iberians, pay little heed to these long-ago myths. For the terms of the treaty were alas never kept, and the vast extensions became fiscal lands later sold to the Count de la Taille-Trétinville. But *monsieur le compte*, who had sold his castles in Fezensac to purchase thousands of acres in the south of Chiloé, was not the right man to exploit and make a profit from one of the most inhospitable areas on the island, so vastly different from the French countryside. Perhaps because he

had married the Chilean aristocrat, Carmen Larrain, he had launched out on a romantic, though hardly profitable enterprise involving damp, desolate, densely forested lands, with no pathways to speak of. Needless to say, the venture did not prosper and the count eventually sold off most of the estate in 1997 to one Jeremiah Henderson, an American businessman who, in the eyes of these Indians, is the very epitome of capitalism. The count's children still own around forty thousand hectares in Quellón, though the young Count de la Taille-Trétinville does not evince particular interest in forestry exploitation, spending most of his time teaching bridge at the Catholic University in Santiago.

Who, then, is this Jeremiah Henderson? At present – for these companies tend to change hands rather unexpectedly – he is the main shareholder in Continental Pacific, the corporation that owns the southernmost region of Chiloé, through Forestal Hawarden, his captive Chilean company. As though this were not enough, I might add he also owns 123 thousand hectares south of Quellón, not to mention another 2,268 hectares north of Castro. In short, he owns 18 percent of Chiloé territory.

But he is also the target of attacks from the island Council of Caciques, or Indian Chieftains, which claims these lands for the Huilliches as promised by the Spanish crown. These lands were, in fact, never actually granted to the Indians – except for a very small portion of them, and there is no knowing whether they ever will be. A few indigenous communities in the region have, in fact, managed to achieve their aims. The Coiquin estate is made up of ten thousand hectares awarded to the descendants of the Indians and there are thirty families exploiting the forest resources. A further six thousand hectares of forestland are currently being judicially claimed off the Chilean state, despite the fact the resources have been sadly depleted due to abusive use by – naturally – Jeremiah Henderson.

What actually happened was that the Chilean Treasury – the proprietor of the lands, in point of fact, at least according to the title deeds if not in intention – sold the lands to Count de la Taille-Trétinville. Later Henderson, skillful businessman as he was, sought to improve the estate's profits, either by selling timber or encouraging tourist enterprises, but kept coming up against indigenous non government organizations which hampered his trade. Roadblocks were one of the most skillful strategies employed by the natives.

Quellón differs considerably from Chonchi or Ancud, precisely because of the isolation the town suffered during Chiloé's cultural confinement. For centuries these lands were practically abandoned; no colonial administration existed in these parts, not even an *encomienda*. The circular Jesuit missions were but infrequent, mainly because they concentrated their efforts on other areas of the archipelago and their churches, such as the island of Quinchao, or Dalcahue, on the northern coast, more prosperous and more densely populated. Whoever could care about those latitudes where there was absolutely nothing, except for a cordillera and impenetrable forests? Nor are there any accounts by travelers, save for some brief comments by Charles Darwin:

*December 6<sup>th</sup>. We reached Caylen [he is actually referring to the island of Cailín, opposite Quellón], called "el fin de la cristiandad". In the morning we stopped for a few minutes at a house on the northern end of Laylec, which was the extreme point of South American Christendom, and a miserable hovel it was. The latitude is 43° 10', which is two degrees farther south than the Rio Negro on the Atlantic coast. These extreme Christians were very poor, and, under the plea of their situation, begged for some tobacco. As a proof of the poverty of these Indians, I may mention that shortly before this, we had met a man, who had traveled three days and a half on foot, and had as many to return, for the sake of recovering the value of a small axe and a few fish.*

*How very difficult it must be to buy the smallest article, when such trouble is taken to recover so small a debt!*

Imagine what Count de la Taille-Trétinville could have done in those remote latitudes. He most likely lacked those groundbreaking attributes of pioneers, their courage, brutality and sheer determination, without which an enterprise seeking to make a profit out of almost four hundred thousand hectares of forestland could never be undertaken. Henderson, instead, had the indispensable know-how required in this kind of business, but he came upon ethnic difficulties, environmentalists and a hostile press, our modern-day weapons. And south of Quellón, history becomes even bloodier and more appalling: only a few hours away by ship are the Guaiteca islands, where the pirate Nancupel made his incursions, using methods that would make even the hardest shudder.

When sailing in this direction, leaving from the port of Quellón, a traveler cannot but feel to some extent that he has arrived at the ends of the earth. Mayhap it is the ominous image of the Corcovado or simply the colony of penguins floating peacefully in this dark sea that creates a sense of estrangement and even desolation. We had set sail for the island of Coldita before noon on an old barge with an outboard motor, the vessel used by the mayor of Quellón, Iván Haro. It was a small party, including only, apart from myself, a specialist in biodiversity, Roxana Riveros, a biologist from Ancud and the mayor himself. Our trip was no mere sightseeing tour, for this island had been the home of the official's grandparents, who had lived on the spot on where once had stood the home of *doña* Paula Nancupel, the wife of the pirate.

Roxana was young and had adopted an ethnic look – plaits and a wide-brimmed hat – for sailing these seas. She lived in Poyo, on the Chilean mainland, opposite Chiloé, which is tantamount to saying she lived in “the back of beyond” because of its isolation. To get to that remote spot on the Comahue peninsula, she had to take a boat from Puerto Montt and, after sailing for seven hours, had to negotiate the hard-going gravel path to the tiny village where she lived with her husband and her little boy.

“The world can often be unpredictable,” she points out. “There is a Canadian living in Poyo who has a light aircraft. It always makes me catch my breath when I see him landing on the minute makeshift strip of land between the mountains, but it really is a comfort to know that, in an emergency, you can always count on having a plane to fly you out.”

It is not isolation, however, that worries her. She had chosen to live with her husband, a descendent of the native Indians she met on a social programs exchange, in a simple timber house, with mattresses scattered on the floor, precisely because this meant getting away from the urban hubs and their inherent problems.

“But I came up against other problems,” she told me. “In Poyo, the elderly are abandoned by their children and have nobody to look after them, nobody to take them out for a walk or a ride. I want to make a center for them, which isn't going to be an easy task.”

The subsistence economy prevailing in the south of Chile, with a solid family structure and rigidly distributed roles, is foundering. Young people are no longer satisfied with this life. Satellite television sends out powerful messages about the rest of the world, about imitable archetypes, about life in the cities, jobs that provide the means to live and spend on consumer products. Why live on in isolated and insignificant communities like Poyo – as youth would have it – when they could live in Puerto Montt? Why work on tilling the land, or breeding animals, when they could work as

supermarket attendants? Just as happened in Spain, some decades back, when Castilian villages gave the impression of being mere shadows of their former selves, inhabited solely by elderly ladies, rigorously dressed in black, because all the young people had marched off to the great cities, today Poyo might be the emblem of the new culture where there is no longer room for ancestral economies and traditions.

The island of Coldita can be reached by sailing along the coast of Quellón Viejo – a broad beach with a modest chapel - and Trincao, from whence the traveler can just make out Puerto Carmen, the central point of Jeremiah Henderson's estate. One of the problems is that his lands can only be accessed from the sea, and all his attempts at building roads have been systematically sabotaged by the Indian communities, in surprisingly well-organized raids. The traveler can also see the legendary island of Laitec and, far off on the horizon, the rocky ledge marking the *non plus ultra* of this austral world, and the dwelling place of The Siren. It is in this same place, every June 24<sup>th</sup>, on the day of St John, that mysterious fires appear – fires lit by no human hand.

The vessel's prow gently nudges the pebbly beach on Punta Paula, while one of the crew carries each of the passengers off the boat on his shoulders to avoid them getting wet. Then a slight ascent is required among a profusion of trees until the travelers come upon a broad expanse of space abounding in historical and emotional significance.

"This is where my grandparents' home stood," remembers Javier Haro, mayor of Quellón, stretching out an arm to take in a large green space ahead.

He is a young man belonging to the Chiloé political class, and conveys the intrinsic quality of a government official.

"I can remember that apple tree from when I was a child," he says, pointing. "It belonged to *doña* Paula Llancahuen. She used to wait for her husband, the pirate Ñancupel, when he returned from his forays in the Guaitecas, back in 1870. Believe me, little has changed in the landscape in these parts.

From up on the hill, the Corcovado becomes an ever more visible presence, brooding and dramatic, as Haro gradually unveils his childhood memories.

"One of my grandmother's servants used to tell about a time she saw Ñancupel arriving on the beach. He brought with him a variety of trophies captured from vessels and passengers. But to her horror, the clothes he was wearing were stained with the blood of his victims.

At the summit of the hill there is now nothing left, except for *doña* Paula's centenarian apple tree. Her house has long since disappeared, as has that of the mayor's grandparents. The larches and cypresses still live on, side by side with remnants of wooden poles and some rusted metal sheets. The view of the island of Laitec is superb from this angle, and no doubt, from here Paula and Pedro María Ñancupel felt they dominated the strait leading to the Guaitecas with all it involved: power, wealth, ambition and adventure. And they mayhap believed their good fortune would last forever, that the deaths counted for nothing, and that the Guaiteca archipelago was sufficiently large and fearsome to prevent a pirate being captured. It was a grave mistake. But it did, arguably, make Ñancupel immortal.

In the 1840s the island of Tranqui to some extent marked the limit of Chilote civilization. Further south there was nothing more than Huildad, hardly more than a hamlet, the location of the southernmost *encomienda* on the island in colonial times. From this point southwards were ghostly islands and desolate cordilleras. It was there,

among fjords and within view of the continental volcanoes, that Paula Llancahuen was born, one December 28<sup>th</sup> in 1842. Today we would probably view Tranqui as a sort of paradise lost; though located close to the larger island, its isolation was more severe than that of people living in Castro or Ancud, at the time little more than squalid settlements. Despite the century and a half that has elapsed, Tranqui is still as isolated as in the times of our heroine, lacking both roads and ferries. Paula's childhood was out of the ordinary, to say the least. She never knew her mother, who died only a short time after she was born, and her first years were spent in an Arcadia ruled only by nature: the sea, the forest, the rains, the capture of fish and seafood, and the tiny vessel that ferried her across to the mainland. But one day it all came to an end: she was taken to live with her uncle, Domingo Nahuelhuen, or, as people were wont to call him, Chacha, in Terao, south of Teupa and close to Chonchi. Not that this outpost was more civilized than Tranqui – it was no more than a handful of houses by the sea –, but there at least she had her aunt Domitila who cared for her, and the powerful figure of her uncle, a prosperous tradesman who sold cypress timber.

It was not this, however, that marked Paula's life at the age of ten. One day Pedro María Ñancupel was brought to Terao to live under the same roof; this boy of thirteen had lost his father and was taken in by *don* Domingo, who gave him a job. Though shy and retiring, he must have caused a powerful impression on Paula. Unlike other teenagers, the lad was unusually single-minded in observing and learning, as though already preparing for the designs fate had in store for him. It was thus that, at the age of thirteen Paula married Pedro in Queilen. It was, in actual fact, a multiple ceremony, for there were fourteen young couples who took their marriage vows, taking advantage of the fact Father Berardo was visiting the hamlet. And, seeing the priest was around, there were many who took the opportunity to have baptisms and confirmations. But the home of *Tío* Chacha was not the place where these two young newly-weds wished to live and work. They heard the song of the siren, though not the one on the island of Laitec but another, far more irresistible, emanating from the southern confines of the earth, where only the hardest of men dared to venture: the Guaitecas, that mountainous, forsaken, thickly forested archipelago where sea lions abounded. It was there they decided to live, in desolate, primeval surroundings. There are no records of the vessel that took them this far south, but it was most likely a sloop. Let us imagine, then, for a moment, these two youngsters – for Pedro was no more than seventeen – on the deck of the vessel, holding hands, gazing starboard at the Chiloé coast while sailing south driven by the winds from the Pirulil cordillera. From that angle, Chiloé would have looked like a re-creation. How different was that land seen from a distance; even the isle of Tranqui hovering on the horizon, where Paula had spent her childhood, was well-nigh unrecognizable, and dazzlingly beautiful. The string of islands thus paraded before the enthralled eyes of these youngsters en route to the unknown: Laitec, Coldita, San Pedro. And then, the immensity of the Corcovado Gulf and its hovering volcano.

At long last, the Guaitecas archipelago. What amazing solitude, what hitherto unknown silence. They disembarked at Puquitrín, at that time virgin territory, where they erected their timber home; in all likelihood neither of them was ever able to forget those months spent at the very ends of the earth, cut off from family and friends, with only a few pets they had taken with them, bonded by the passion of extreme youth. The time came when Pedro started navigating the labyrinthine archipelago in search of seals and sea lions, and in that persistent quest gradually came to know the channels, coves and safe harbors, the threatening rocks jutting out of the sea, which might split a vessel in two, the caves where one might take shelter – or even conceal valuable plunder. As the



years slipped by, there came a time when there was no passage Pedro Ñancupel did not know, no bay he had not navigated.

There is no way of knowing what mutation – for mutation it must indeed have been – turned him into the man he was to become. He had already built his home on the isle of Coldita, where he and Paula would sit and watch the strait and the volcanoes; the Guaitecas were no longer an exotic dwelling place and had become, instead, a rich hunting ground. One day he set off from Quellón on his way to the archipelago to meet up with his brother Juan, a hunter after his own heart, in Casa de Quilas, fully supplied with shotgun and gunpowder. Juan was accompanied by one of his nephews and a Guaiteca dweller, Nahuelhuen. In these remote latitudes it was not infrequent to meet up with other parties of hunters, which is precisely what happened in Casa de Quilas, where the Manquemilla brothers, old friends hailing from Terao, also decided to spend the night.

Perhaps some obscure inner process had ripened somewhere deep inside Pedro Ñancupel and surfaced that night in March. He would never get rich – apparently the height of his aspirations – on hunting and fishing, which were monotonous, sterile activities; wealth would require throwing overboard any rules, leaving aside ethics, friendship and compassion, and rejecting even the most elemental of Christian principles. That ill-omened night, under the cold southern stars, he managed to convince his companions: they would only be millionaires if they stole furs. The mutation was complete. They murdered the Manquemilla brothers in cold blood while they slept, and concealed their bodies in a nearby cave, and presto, they now had their first booty of furs, weapons and other gear. It is surprising they felt no guilt about this atrocious crime, as though taking the life of friends or acquaintances were something quite ordinary; quite the opposite, they considered it was but the beginning of an enterprise that would ensure fabulous earnings. Now it was simply a question of searching the archipelago in their quest for further plunder.

They chose the cloak of darkness for their forays, surprising the unwary on their return with their sloops loaded down with furs and shellfish, either while they slept or, as a more elaborate alternative, asking them for shelter and then sharing *chicha* with them until their hosts were entirely drunk. Then they massacred them, concealing their bodies in caves in the proximities. It was thus the Nahuelquines, neighbors from Quellón, were slaughtered, and their vessel later sunk to allay suspicions. It was then the turn of the Chodiles, natives of Huilad, slain in Casa de Ranas, whose naked bodies were disposed of at the foot of a deep gorge. They were identified many years later, when all that was left were their skulls and a few bones, for there was a board bearing the sloop's registration number.

How easily Pedro Ñancupel and his associates struck it rich in the Guaitecas! Who could have more expertise in navigating those channels, and piloting through obstacles and dangers? He had devoted years to getting to know them, to discovering their mysteries, to finding strategically located caves and coves. At first, nobody in Chiloé even dreamt these might be acts of piracy. If a vessel never returned it had no doubt foundered in the Corcovado Gulf, during an unexpected tempest that would make the waves crash fiercely against the rocky coasts. How could they survive the high winds and primeval waves? While their ignorance prevailed, Ñancupel was purchasing ounces of gold, gunpowder and other necessary tackle in Castro or Ancud. Over the years he lost interest in the sloops and their predictable cargo. The time had come to progress, to aim at more interesting bounty, and organize master strikes.

Towards 1870, vessels had timidly started to include steam engines, though they still needed their sails to achieve full speed. Until the Panama Canal was built in 1914,

the regular maritime course was round Cape Horn, with those gigantic waves reminiscent of Creation, or along the Strait of Magellan. But a large part of the south of the Chilean continent is made up of long channels that provided access to large tonnage vessels, which could thus avoid the fury of the Pacific Ocean in these parts. Many preferred to avoid the fearsome Cape Pilar, on Desolation Island, which marked the entry to the Magellan Strait. Or the formidable Group of Evangelists close to the occidental mouth of the strait, which are – like the apostles who wrote the New Testament gospels – four rocky promontories no skilled captain wished to have leeward during a storm. So frequent and terrifying were the accounts of shipwrecks in the area that many captains preferred to sail up the channels to avoid storms, currents and strong tides. But there they were to come upon an even greater danger than nature could provide: Pedro Ñancupel.

Pirates, in contrast to corsairs, lacked any ethical codes and even the smallest degree of compassion. Corsairs, or privateers, captured vessels and secured their cargo and sometimes the ships, but respected the lives of their passengers and crewmembers. Pirates, instead, left no trace of their raids, and therefore resorted to entire extermination. Around that time there arrived in the port of Santo Domingo, in the Guaitecas, a large sailboat, seeking to take on fresh water. What a golden opportunity for Pedro Ñancupel! This was no sloop to be boarded in faraway channels, but a large vessel with an extremely valuable cargo. The crewmembers who went ashore not only came upon a creek of fresh water, but also upon a contingent of pirates. The slaughter was swift and effective.

On board the sailing vessel, the captain wondered why his men had not returned. Perhaps he chatted meanwhile with his young wife, or played with his little son, both of whom had accompanied him on this journey. A second party set off in search of the missing crewmen. They, too, never returned. Yet a third search party was sent out, but did not return. They had all been slain by Ñancupel. The vessel was dangerously unprotected, for the only ones remaining on board were the captain, his family and his helmsman. And, just like in the Technicolor pirate movies of yore, Ñancupel and his henchmen rowed stealthily out to the ship and boarded her. But this real life story did not have the ending Hollywood script-writers might provide: there was no duel between expert swordsmen, nor pirates swinging from rope to rope with a knife between their teeth, nor the black skull and crossbones of the Jolly Roger. There was only swift, cold-blooded murder that cost the captain and the helmsman their lives. The woman and child were left in the clutches of Ñancupel.

As usual the cargo had to be concealed as soon as possible to avoid it being discovered. The men hid the sails in a cave, and the furniture, money, weapons and clothing in another. The vessel, whose captain had made the fatal mistake of stopping at the port of Santo Domingo in search of fresh water, was stripped of its masts and moorings, towed out to open sea weighed down with rocks, and then neatly drilled through. She sank slowly into the deep waters of the Corcovado Gulf.

Imagine for an instant the captain's young widow and her tiny son living on one of the southern islands with these murderers. There was no one to pay a ransom, so they had no hopes of being able to escape from this hellhole. One can only guess at her repugnance at having to submit to the sexual advances of Pedro María Ñancupel, her husband's executioner. Who could save her in these far-flung latitudes? Perhaps her powerful instinct for survival, or the fact that the life of her son was at stake led her to accept anything, to think of the possibility of escaping, or that there might be some vessel in the area that might come to her rescue. If only she had something she could use to bargain with her captors. But there was nothing left. Not her husband, nor the

vessel, nor her cargo. Deep down she knew that there was no way out, that their lives depended on the compassion or cruelty of one unscrupulous, heartless man. There was nowhere in the Guaitecas a captain like Tom Lingard. In *The Rescue*, Joseph Conrad drew a powerful profile of this character, who abandoned a Malayan king to his fortunes to save the passengers of a British yacht that had run aground in shallow waters, and were under threat from minor sultans. Nor was this woman Mrs. Travers, who wrought such a change in the life of Lingard. She was a woman inexorably left to her fate, resisting the idea of her son dying with her.

Pedro Ñancupel was the opposite face of the same coin, for the life of his captives depended solely on him. Primitive, in all likelihood coarse and avaricious, he did what any pirate would have done with his captives, making a Dionysian feast of their captivity, with sexual excesses and alcohol in plenty. But the time would come when he would have to make a decision. Perhaps he thought of Paula, his wife, and his children, as a father and a husband, and of the atrocious responsibilities of pirates regarding the lives of others. It would be naïve to believe it cost him nothing to come to a decision which was, on the other hand, the only option open to him. What was he to do with a woman and child in the midst of such desolation? To set them free would have been simply unthinkable, for they would become witnesses, his accusers. Much less could he think of taking them with him. He must have spent several nights debating with himself about the obligations imposed by piracy and the feelings of his own heart. But the day finally came. One morning he marched over to where the child lay, lifted him up by his ankles, head dangling, and coldly announced to the woman he would have to die. The woman must have gone into a frenzy, offering anything in exchange for the life of her child, beseeching, kneeling, imploring. There was nothing she could do. With a couple of swift, skillful movements Pedro Ñancupel cut the child's throat.

Three days later he did away with the child's mother. By this time the woman cared little whether she lived or died, as though the immensity of that ocean, of those ill-fated islands, and this race of murderers had forever stripped her of feeling.

The killings, far from placating Ñancupel, stimulated him even more. His next strike was against a merchant ship, the *Jilguero*, under the orders of Captain Pedro Garay, accompanied, as fate would have it, by his wife and his fifteen-year-old daughter. It would be unnecessarily cruel to describe the horror and bloodshed, the bodies left to rot in caves. None of the passengers or the crew survived to tell their story. But this time it was traditional families from Castro and Ancud that were affected, and a dark suspicion began to float in the humid air of Chiloé that perhaps this was not a question of shipwrecks, but that there were pirates on these coasts. It was during those years that *doña* Paula's uncle, el Chacha Nahuelhuen, was executed in Ancud, accused of having put several people to death and taken possession of their belongings. Without his even being aware of it, the countdown had begun for Pedro Ñancupel.

He continued with his raids up and down the channels, boarding vessels and burying their crew. Antonio Cárdenas Tabies, in *Los Guaitequeros*, provides a particularly vivid description of the way Ñancupel operated.

*Liberato Chiguay told about the way he escaped from certain death at the hands of Ñancupel in the Guaitecas. And this was how he described it:*

*"There were four of us in a dilapidated sloop, out hunting coypus and otters. We came upon Pedro Ñancupel, and when he saw us he called out:*

*"Ho, cousin! Where do you come from then?"*

*“From the south.”*

*“This has to be celebrated. Come on down, we have a good wine.”*

*“Wait for me cousin, just a while. On the other side of the island there are some quetro ducks. What think you if we catch some and roast them?”*

*“Go about it, then, I will be waiting for you here.”*

*Said Chiguay, “Ñancupel believed what we told him about the quetro ducks, and we rowed off as though we had not a care in the world; but once we were concealed by the shadow of the island, we stripped off our clothes and made off at full speed, for our life depended on it. Soon we were bathed in sweat, from head to foot. In the distance Ñancupel came into view in his sloop, insulting us and urging his oarsmen to catch up with us; it was a veritable race among those Guaiteca channels. Fortunately, we had a head start on him and were able to leave him behind; but they kept on shooting at us for almost half an hour, we could feel the bullets whistling over our head. In the end they lost interest in the chase and turned back.”*

Melinka – which took its name from a relative of the town’s founder, Felipe Westhoff, – was the epicenter of the Guaitecas: located in the northernmost area of the islands, it was the port of call for all nature of vessels. On one occasion a large vessel under a foreign flag sailed into the harbor; however, when the time came for her to leave, she was unable to complete the maneuvers, a difficulty Ñancupel – coincidentally in the area – promptly offered to help overcome. With one condition: he demanded all the crew should debark and be replaced by his own, who were more experienced in this kind of maneuver. Which was how the vessel sailed out to sea never to return. He had captured this goodly sized vessel without firing a single shot.

It is here the different versions regarding the life of Ñancupel begin to mingle. Much has been written about this man who became a legend in his land, and many adventures have been attributed to him; there are those who insist he never killed anyone and that the infamy of accusing him of crimes he never committed was the work of his enemies and sensationalist journalists. As Antonio Cárdenas Tabies tells it, for instance, after capturing that last vessel in Melinka, he set sail for Chiloé and, once on dry land, made his way with his lover to the Caracoles ravine, where his wife – whom we can but assume was *doña* Paula – was living at the time. In the words of this version Pedro María had no qualms of compassion for this woman who had given him a lifetime of love and companionship, who had sailed with him to the Guaitecas in their youth, who had shared the little wooden home with him there on a mountaintop on the island of Coldita. He simply killed her with a huge blow on the forehead. He took a shovel, dug a hole in the ground, and placed her in it face down. Thus did Paula Llancahuen come to the end of her days, without the solace of a confessor or the chance of Christian burial. Mario Contreras Vega, instead, insists in his book about Ñancupel that *doña* Paula buried the pirate after he was shot in Castro. We have no way of knowing, of course, whether it was history or literature that prevailed in this version. Yet most accounts agree the woman was killed, not by Ñancupel but by his son, also executed in 1911, as though the stigma had been an inherent part of that family.

But let us turn once more to the Guaitecas and Ñancupel. His escapades not only struck fear in the heart of sailors, but also led to the government of Santiago deciding to bring this string of crimes to an end. Finding him was no easy matter. Who could have been better at eluding captors in those labyrinthine channels, in those deserted islands. But, as is wont to happen, after plying his “trade” as a pirate with impunity, Pedro María came to feel all-powerful. He was not only rich but had become a legend in the

land. And this was to be his downfall, for he made a mistake that was to cost him his life, an absurd, gratuitous blunder that can only be explained by the progressive lack of reality in his life.

Legend tells that Ñancupel had made up his mind to kill a hundred people, and by that time, according to his count, he had taken the lives of ninety-nine. By doing away with one more human he would reach that momentous figure. It was at the port of Bocatín, in the Guaitecas, that fate came upon him in the shape of two sloops with a crew of eight men, and a generous cargo. As so often happens with people of such reputation, there was an informer. It was probably not the intention of Ñancupel's nephew, while playing ball with the newcomers, to warn them that his uncle was 'planning to kill them that night, which is a pity when you play ball so well'. When these men from the Guaitecas discovered it was actually Pedro Ñancupel they had come upon, they crept stealthily off to Melinka while the pirate slept, clutching his carbine, as was his wont. Three hours later they were back with the police. Practically without putting up a fight, he was shackled and carried off to Melinka. For eight days the legendary pirate of the Guaitecas was kept locked up in a dungeon. Yet that was to be but the start of his ordeal.

There were many who were interested in his execution – and not only relatives of his victims, for there was a veritable tangle of interests woven round Ñancupel and his activities that had little to do with any loved ones put to death by the pirate. One of the people most interested in his being executed was Ciríaco Álvarez, for the pirate's incursions into the Guaiteca channels involved a direct threat to his cypress timber trade and other secondary activities, such as fur dealing. As expected, he was taken to Castro for trial. His captivity lasted twenty-two dreary months. For almost two years he was locked up in a dark dungeon, in shackles, perhaps awaiting a miracle. And he was not entirely wrong. A well-founded version holds that the government of Santiago would rather have him alive than dead, and that a presidential pardon was being sought. Whoever could have been interested in keeping such a monster alive? Whatever for? It was, in fact, quite simple. The Chilean Navy and maritime trade required a guide pilot who knew the southern channels like the back of his hand, who knew exactly where the dangers lay and could avoid accidents and unnecessary delays for any maritime traffic in the area. This would save them both time and money. Who could be better than Pedro Ñancupel to take on this position? Of course, there was the fact that he was accused of having committed brutal crimes, but there were State reasons that rose above this misconduct.

Meanwhile, for those almost two years, Ñancupel lived in the most absolute isolation, deprived of light and mobility in a dungeon in Castro. He, who had been the lord of the seas, who had allowed no one to deter him in his intents, was now constrained to spend his days in chains awaiting a verdict. How far off those days must have seemed when he sailed wherever he pleased, when one year was the same as the next, where life took on an eternal, endless quality, and time had lost its essence. They were two appalling years, locked into that cramped space, where, as the days, weeks and months elapsed, he must have accepted he would only be let out of his confinement to go to his death. Which is what eventually happened. On November 6<sup>th</sup> 1888, at two in the afternoon, he was marched out into the prison yard. With his eyes bandaged, and his hands tied behind his back he faced the firing squad; six bullets lodged in his body, though it was only one of them that killed him.

There was no funeral and some versions hold *doña* Paula carried his body off to the Catholic Cemetery in Castro to give it formal burial. Page 93 of the Castro Death Registry for 1888 records the death of one Pedro María Ñancupel Alarcón, fifty years of

age, fisherman by profession, put to death by a firing squad. It is certainly ironic that a posthumous document should have described him as a “fisherman”, as though even in death his condition as a pirate of the southern seas were denied. According to some, he carried in his blood the genes of a memorable Dutch pirate who afflicted Chiloé during the seventeenth century: Jan Cooper, who had children with a native island girl, and the surname Ñancupel would simply be the garbled form of the bandit’s name.

There are yet others who declare that the day after he was shot the presidential pardon arrived from Santiago, along with his nomination as a “guide pilot”. But this is mere guesswork that can be no more than utopian. How long could Ñancupel have lasted as a guide pilot in the Guaitecas? Sooner or later he would have deserted, and turned to the piracy that ran in his blood. Perhaps he deserved another kind of death. One might argue that instead of dying before a firing squad in a miserable jail in Castro, he should have died in hand to hand combat while boarding one of those vessels he loved to hunt down, a fitting death, so often the tragic fate of these so called heroes.

Quellón is, quite possibly, the least likely place in Chiloé to meet an intellectual. There are writers, anthropologists, painters and poets in Castro, in Ancud, but the last thing one would expect to find in that tiny harbor town, beleaguered by a ferocious climate, is a man of rare wit and astounding culture, belonging to a legendary Chilean family historically bound to literature. I had heard speak of Rubén Azócar, a great friend of Pablo Neruda’s, but it was in Castro I heard that one of his sons, Pedro Rubén, now lived in Quellón with his wife, and that his whole life – not to mention his work – had been precisely the opposite of conventional. I arrived in Quellón one rainy noon in December, in my laborious attempt to locate the Azócar’s home, on *calle Santos Vargas*, in the town center. He had given me some references when we spoke on the phone so I might find the house more easily: locating it, however, somehow reminded me of the search for the way out of Ariadna’s labyrinth; it was, as he had told me, opposite a school, which turned out to be a key piece of information, for visitors had to walk down a narrow, wooded open-air passageway, until they reached a small dwelling with roses round the door.

Pedro Rubén Azócar has all the appearance of an intellectual past the age of seventy, but who, curiously, still conserves traits that were all the rage in his youth. He is amazingly tall and thin, his hair is white, like his beard and his *fin de siècle* moustache, which together with his plaid shirt and informal grey woolen vest, turn him into a veritable southern *rara avis*. We tried chatting in the main lounge, but the sound of the rain forcefully drumming on the zinc roof made it well nigh impossible to understand what we were saying. As so often happens in Chiloé, we ended up in the kitchen, by the fire, where expression seems to take on a deeper meaning. Pedro Rubén has walked so many different paths in his life, that it is at times hard to put them together, such is their diversity: a schoolteacher in Apeche, a tiny Chiloé hamlet by the sea; a political exile; a Paris dweller completing his PhD in anthropology; a gardener in the French *midi*; a writer who, among other topics, has analyzed the myths of Chiloé as no one before him has done. But the passion characterizing his life is part of family tradition, a father who was a member of the Chilean poets’ Olympus, and an aunt who unleashed hurricane-style passions in the heart of many a poet. Poetry is an intrinsic part of Chileans. Suffice it to remember that two Nobel Prizes for Literature were awarded to poets from this country, Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda.

When Pedro Rubén Azócar talks of his father he calls him Rubén. It was this man who arrived in Ancud in the early 1920's, in the company of another young friend, Ricardo Eliecer Neftalí Reyes Basoalto, whom the world would come to know as Pablo Neruda – a surname he adopted at the age of sixteen, after the Czech poet Jan Neruda. Rubén fell in love with a girl from Chonchi, a pupil of his, whom he married. From his experiences in Chiloé Azócar wrote a novel, *Gente en la isla*, mentioned in a previous chapter, with characters some of the inhabitants of Chonchi felt they could recognize, and it made them furious. But it was his sister, born in 1902, and christened Albertina – a name probably inspired by Marcel Proust – who eventually became the muse for the greatest of Chilean poets. Pablo Neruda was one of her lovers, not to mention the first of them, the “accursed poet” Raimundo Echevarría y Larrazábal who died of cancer at a very young age, as so frequently happened in the romantic milieu of the early twentieth century.

Albertina Azócar - sister of Pedro's father, Rubén - met Neruda when they were students at the Instituto Pedagógico de la Universidad de Chile, in Santiago, in the early 1920's, and it was a romance limited solely to holding hands and strolling around together. Yet young Albertina, the girl of the tea-colored eyes, awoke in the young poet a love that was to last for several years, marked by letters and poems. In 1924, Neruda wrote his *Twenty love poems and a song of despair*, and poem six was inspired by Albertina.

*I remember you as you were in the last autumn.  
You were the grey beret and the still heart.  
In your eyes the flames of the twilight fought on.  
And the leaves fell in the water of your soul.*

*Clasping my arms like a climbing plant  
the leaves garnered your voice, that was slow and at peace.  
Bonfire of awe in which my thirst was burning.  
Sweet blue hyacinth twisted over my soul.*

*I feel your eyes traveling, and the autumn is far off:  
grey beret, voice of a bird, heart like a house  
towards which my deep longings migrated  
and my kisses fell, happy as embers.*

*Sky from a ship. Field from the hills:  
Your memory is made of light, of smoke, of a still pond!  
Beyond your eyes, farther on, the evenings were blazing.  
Dry autumn leaves revolved in your soul*

Then one day Neruda, by then a Latin American poet of some renown, set sail for the Far East. His prestige had opened the doors to a career in diplomacy; his first destination in 1929, as a consul, was Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where his love and nostalgia for Albertina Azócar reached tropical heights. And, with letters as the most frequent, and possibly the only communication possible, he refused to contemplate the thought of parting from his love. One of these memorable letters is precisely about that

passion. *"Your beautiful portrait is on my night table: I have had a frame made for it, from a precious wood, tamarind, and your eyes, those eyes I thought were never to see me again, look out on me night and day. I am beginning to tire of such solitude and if you do not come, I shall try and marry some other"*. The letter was prophetic, for only a short time later Neruda married a Dutch girl, María Antonieta Hagenaar. Though other women were to come later in his life, like the Argentine Delia del Carril and, ultimately, Matilde Urrutia, he never stopped writing to Albertina, and telling her of his love.

Albertina eventually married – as was to be expected – a Chilean poet, Ángel Cruchaga Santamaría, one of the great exponents of mystic poetry.

This, then, was Pedro Rubén Azócar's family background. We chatted in the kitchen of his home in Quellón, which was practically like saying at the ends of the earth; his dialogue was brilliant, well rounded, conceptual. Yet his childhood was not linked to the poetic heights his father and his aunt Albertina frequented; it was much more rudimentary.

"I was born in Ancud, but as a very young child I was taken to Chonchi, where I grew up in the peasant surroundings of my grandparents' home," Pedro Rubén explained. "I've lived most of my life in Chiloé, which is why all the people from Chonchi know me; though they don't call me Azócar, but Andrade, my maternal grandparents' surname.

His family had some land in the Pirulil cordillera, and it was during those years he first came to know Cucao, when a dilapidated little plane used to land on the beach with a crowd of writers, painters, people of fortune, some of whom were Argentine, all of whom would be packed into Julio Maldini's boarding house, some sleeping on flea-infested sheepskins, yet even so, fascinated with their surroundings. Cucao had acquired a special kind of *charme* and was the first contact Pedro Rubén had with a world that had little in common with that primitive Chiloé back in the 1930's. But one day his father, Rubén, determined to take him to Santiago to study, a decision which sparked sharp conflicts between them. What a difference he found between this large metropolis, with clearly urban features, and his beloved Chonchi with its simplicity, and its deep-rooted, ancestral Chiloé traditions! Even the food seemed to him as though it were from a different planet.

"The change was traumatic," he told me. "Until I was fourteen there was only a single tap in the upper area of Chonchi, opposite the Carabineers headquarters: we used to queue up there with out little buckets to get them filled with water.

Santiago was but a stage in his life. At the age of twenty, he decided to teach in Chiloé, and was sent to Apeche, one of the remotest villages, far out in the fiord of Paildad. Even today it takes a missionary heart to defy a path at times impossible, with its steep slopes and curves – and it was summer when I was there! In winter, that trail must be practically impassable. But young Pedro Rubén was contented in that rural environment where both he and his wife taught. Not to forget, of course, the other functions required by teachers at that time in the community, that had little to do with teaching.

This became more than clear during the 1960 earthquake, which found him in Apeche. His instinct, his sense of danger, his selflessness, led him to inquire into what had happened in Queilen, the largest settlement in the area, and dangerously close to the seashore. In Apeche, the tremor had been ferocious, most of the vessels had been destroyed and the sea level had risen alarmingly over the last four days. He made up his mind to sail to Queilen in the only motorboat available, with his dog as his sole crewman.



“I found a ghost town, for it was completely deserted,” he remembered. “I wondered what could have happened to the inhabitants, but could find no explanation. The dog suddenly started racing up a hill, barking ceaselessly. The sound brought a crowd out into the open; they had sought refuge up in the hills from what they thought might be a tidal wave. They had been up there for four days, practically without victuals. When they saw the dog, and then realized I had come with him, their fear subsided to some extent, and they returned to Queilen.”

One cannot help wondering what a person can learn, how somebody – in this case a teacher – can be enriched by staying twenty years in a tiny hamlet, surrounded by primitive peasants, having little or no contact with anything urban, limited to all but elementary dialogue. Paradoxically, it was his prolonged stay there that provided him with a profound understanding of rural Chilotes, their ancestral beliefs, their myths, the power witchcraft still held over them, all of which was to be the basis of his written work.

“I studied anthropology in my own particular way, privately,” he admitted. “I’m self-taught in the subject.”

The rain drummed persistently on in Quellón and Pedro Rubén’s wife paused in her kitchen tasks to admit there had never been such a cold, changeable end of spring. But in Chiloé even the weather has its unanticipated contrasts, for without any warning the sun came out; it was but an ephemeral sparkle, for soon the rain was again falling in torrents.

His discoveries over those twenty years took place mainly in summer, when there is no interest in going away on holiday: daylight lasts until far into the night, which provided him with the time to carry out a particular survey of this group of people, a comparative vision put together as he traveled round the different regions. And he came up with a curious idea of Chiloé mythology, where central or modular motivation is always the same, but symbolic expression is different in each sector. His first concerns were related to the *raison d’être*, the grounds, the causes that led to these differences.

“In this latter instance, they provide us with a mythological system to a certain sense disjointed. And understanding this took a good many years of my life,” he pointed out.

He is not unaware, however, of the power of myths in this culture. In his admirable work *Chiloé: Living presence of mythical beings, their sociological effect on island communities*, he summarizes this feeling.

*If we were to apply the term **mythological** to the narrations, legends and advice that, probably stemming from an initial effort by primitive mentality to explain the origin of natural phenomena – and later the origin of man, provided the means to personify these phenomena and eventually led to the creation of the gods and their subsequent religious system, we would note the lack of such **mythologies or mythological narrations** in our tradition.*

*It is thus, therefore, that it is not **El Thrauco** or **La Pincoya** who exist, but thraucos and pincoyas and, unless these warlocks were accepted as priests of some unknown cult, a religious system would never have been organized.*

And further on he adds:

*...There is no other mythical, religious or magical system here to explain the world and its phenomena, life and death, for the Catholic religion is little more than liturgy and satisfies only a part of the mystic unrest of a human group so easily dazzled by the awe-inspiring, or the unusual.*

His life unexpectedly gave a dramatic turn – as happened to most Chilean thinkers who supported the government of Salvador Allende. It was during holidays in Santiago, in 1974, that he had the unfortunate idea of returning to Chiloé. It is likely unnecessary to review all the interrogations he was subjected to, his experience in the jail at Piruquina, close to Castro, but he was, in fact, able to take the road to exile, specifically to Paris, where he won a scholarship in anthropology. His own empirical knowledge was supplemented by academic learning, studying under Joseph and Annette Ampere, whom he had met in Chile when they were doing research into the Alacalufe Indians. He got a PhD in anthropology, something he takes no pride in, for he feels it was accidental. Surprisingly, he did not find Paris intoxicating, as usually happens with intellectuals. Not Saint Germain-des-Prés, nor the brilliant discourse on roadside cafés, nor the multitude of thinkers living in Paris managed to ensnare him. Pedro Rubén Azócar yearned for the countryside, that simple, bucolic life he had always lived, perhaps because the twenty years spent in Apeche had left their imprint on him. Chiloé and its wonderful scenery continued to lure him. He therefore made a heroic decision.

“I spoke to my teacher, Annette Ampere, and told her that I was simply tired of urban life, that I needed to sling my rucksack over my shoulder and get going,” he reminisced.

Ampere understood. What is more, she offered him her home in La Bastide, in the *midi*, in Cardaillac, to be precise. Azócar made his way there by train, on what was to be but the first stage of his journey, for in Marseille there was a message waiting for him, and some money. But life so often has unexpected turns, and train encounters – a recurring theme among Hollywood scriptwriters – can have unsuspected outcomes. What actually happened was that an elegantly dressed man traveling on the train took one look at him and said: “You must be an exile”. He too was on his way to Cardaillac, and the two men spent the journey leisurely drinking coffee in the dining car. What a delight to slip through the French countryside and be able to contemplate it from a train, a means of locomotion unfortunately falling into disuse in South America. How timely this encounter had been, as though fate were tracing his next steps. Because what this man, who turned out to be Swiss, offered him was to care for his house in Cardaillac and tend to his gardens. Needless to say, he gave up any idea of heading for Marseille.

“The house was simply fabulous,” he assured me. “But apart from that, there were only thirty families living in the surroundings, and life was absolute peasant simplicity, like in Chiloé.”

It might perhaps be worth noting that Cardaillac was no conventional village, but rather an exquisite medieval hamlet, whose appearance in textbooks dates back to the eighth century, when Pippin the Younger granted lands to *chevalier* Bertrand, who took the name Cardaillac. It was then the towers evocative of the Middle Ages emerged, along with the narrow lanes and tiled roof houses, surrounded by an undulating, intensely green landscape. Pedro Rubén Azócar may never have imagined the kind of scenery he was to encounter there and in the proximities, like Rocamadour, where houses were overhanging the cliffs. Surprisingly enough, it has not changed with the years, for even today there are no more than five hundred people living there.

"I even managed a reconciliation with the French," he joked, "for Parisians are not precisely friendly."

A short time later he left Cardaillac to live on the property that belonged to Annette Amperaire in La Bastide, which was also in the vicinity.

In the mid-nineties, in other words, twenty years later, Pedro Rubén returned to Chiloé. He settled in with his wife in Quellón and decided to set down in writing all he had learnt. He declares he has read absolutely everything ever written about Chiloé myths and sorcery, and his eager eyes and intellectual clarity have run onto the paper, as his thoughts have emerged in his dialogues, for he is a genuine *causeur*.

"Nowadays mythology is still there, though I must admit its influence has waned to some extent. But instead of existing as a mystic system, it relies a lot on what modern day warlocks do," he told me. "There are many young people in Apeche and Contuy today who still believe in witchcraft; in people who wield a certain type of power. And the surprising part is the way purely mythical issues merge in with what these sorcerers do."

He provides a clear example to confirm his theory. Say somebody is left handicapped by the effects of a draught of air, or for some other reason, then the villagers will seek a piece of two-legged *pahueldun*, a bush that grows in such a crooked fashion it can be given the shape of arms and legs. The strange thing is that this is the same wood used by El Thrauco – who rapes young girls in the forest – as a walking stick. Nor do herbs with curative or magic powers escape the clutches of these warlocks, though Pedro Rubén assured me that Chilotes, Indians, half-breeds and whites alike know of the powers of herbs.

As an anthropologist he is not unaware of the influence of religion (in this case, that of the Catholic church, which prevails on the island) and he considers the Church has always been particularly skillful at assimilating autochthonous beliefs to its calendar of saints' days and such.

"In Mexico," he told me, "the Virgin of Guadalupe was introduced, and in Paraguay, Tutá, one of the strongest mythical Guaraní characters became a representative for Saint Frances."

Of course, in Chiloé, it would have been highly improbable for the religious authorities to transform La Fiura, the revolting wife of El Thrauco, into a religious divinity, or La Pincoya into a Catholic deity. Which is, however, remarkable, considering that the sensual Iemanjá, goddess of the sea in Brasil, is identified with Saint Barbara. But on the archipelago, the Jesuits had an idea that was even more brilliant than deifying vernacular mythological beings, and this led to the creation of the Churchwarden, or *fiscal*, a rare mix of priest and official, who was also part of the social nucleus.

"The Churchwarden could perform the last rites, or baptize, and could also deliver the messages he had received from the warlocks," he told me. "Which was why there were certain rituals to be complied with. For instance, when a house is completed a party has to be organized to ensure the warlocks don't *jump*<sup>1</sup> it. We call it 'signing the floor'. At a distance, popular belief is that warlocks can cause major harm, such as physiological infections, paralysis, or some minor discomfort, like headaches or fever.

The problem is that, with witchcraft not officially recognized as it was in the nineteenth century, and without the notorious and macabre Quicavi Cave or a school for training sorcerers, there is no way of knowing how they can continue to exist, or who instructs them.

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<sup>1</sup> As noted previously, popular belief in Chiloé is that warlocks can fly.

“I simply don’t know,” he said. “But I think it is a family affair, transmitted from generation to generation. Like old cooking recipes.

Despite the years that have elapsed, his exile in France, his talented anthropological works, Pedro Rubén Azócar has never stopped being a teacher, and the imprint of his life in Apeche was much stronger than anything the French *midi* might have left. In fact, rather than yearning for those years of his youth, he regrets that the role of teachers should no longer be given the significance it once had. In the past, teaching involved commitment. A teacher was also a doctor, a janitor, or whatever, willing to spend his life at the school; and these are attitudes that have gradually been lost.

“Now teachers keep to their timetables, and are not affected by the rest of society, as though it didn’t exist,” he complains. “They walk in, take their class and walk out again, disappearing in their vans.

It is likely that life, and the years he has lived, have taught Pedro Rubén Azócar the importance of education and teaching, which he continues to practice in the remote south of Chiloé. Every Tuesday and Thursday he receives two children from a boarding school in nearby Maule, who come to him to review subjects, perhaps because they have discovered competitiveness, as the only way of getting anywhere. Also, they have a profound interest in anything relating to Chiloé.

Nothing can make this teacher, anthropologist, exile, and writer happier, who is still fundamentally an *homme de monde*, despite his living in the most out-of-the-way confines of a remote southern island.

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# THE SECRET OF QUEMCHI

There is a small island, or might I say an islet, on the northeastern coast of Chiloé, facing out onto the continental volcanoes – a romantic, grassy promontory with beautiful trees, a chapel and a cemetery. That diminutive piece of land emerging from the placid waters close to Quemchi is known by the name of Aucar. Up until 1971, the only way to get there was by boat, or on foot when the tide went out abruptly and left the seabed bare; but in that year a 500 meter-long wooden walkway was inaugurated, to avoid people having to depend on the tides or on sailboats when there was a burial or if they wished to take flowers to a departed one. In contrast to the cemeteries in Teupa and Chelín, the tombs are not dolls houses, with slanting roofs and furniture, but simple tombstones.

Over the years the bridge has begun to fall apart, and though oft repaired, it is still a challenge to cross it on foot, for there are always loose timbers, or even gaping holes where the wooden planks have been washed away. Aucar has been given the name of “the island of the sailing souls”, for the dead there give the impression of being on a perpetual sailing trip. This literary name was created by Francisco Coloane, perhaps the greatest Chilean writer, who was present at the inauguration of the walkway for the simple reason that he loved the place: he was born in Quemchi in 1910, and spent his childhood and early youth in this tiny timber trading port that clearly conditioned his narratives.

I returned to Quemchi on a second visit, attracted not only by its beauty – for it must be one of the most delightful villages in Chiloé – but also in search of information about Francisco Coloane, though there is no longer anything there belonging to him or his family, except for a commemorative bust. The house on stilts where he spent the first years of his life had been destroyed. There were, however other, less literary and much more up-to-date reasons, among which was computing. Few people are aware that not long ago Bill Gates, the richest man alive, arrived incognito to this remotest of ports. And, as we shall see, he did not come precisely for sightseeing, or on business, or to study an insular culture. But let us return to Coloane. In some ways he reminds me of Joseph Conrad, for his literary greatness lies not only in the succinctness of his prose – so different from the sublime density and proliferation of adjectives Conrad uses in his first novel, *Almayer's Folly*. But Coloane's life to some extent mirrored that of this Polish writer, particularly as regards their out-of-the-way scenarios – Malaysia and the Magellan strait, respectively – and because they lived out their younger years in a rough world of men, where honor and unexpected passions provided unsuspected twists to their narrative.

“To my mind, Conrad is the greatest writer who's ever written about the sea; a single phrase of his I always remember is a worthy testimony, and likewise points to what a writer about the sea should be: ‘A writer must care for his phrase the way a crew

wash down their deck', he remarked to Virginia Vidal, with whom he had long chats. "I've been compared to Jack London. I was also introduced to his books late. He had some good and bad books, just as I have," he confessed, in a surprising show of modesty.

Fate, or rather, his father's premature death, took him to Punta Arenas, on the Magellan Strait, where he entered the Salesian fathers' school. It was in 1928, after completing his compulsory military service, that two events in his life marked what was to be a veritable turning point. The first of these was the death of his mother, in Quemchi, which left him without any sort of future financial aid. The other was his finding a job on a ranch in Magellan, as an ordinary farmhand. A strange decision for a boy of eighteen who had never done any rough work in the fields – if anyone can say there are actually fields in Magellan – and had lived in Quemchi and Puerto Montt, where he completed his religious seminar. Here, once again, we find existential similarities with Joseph Conrad, born in Poland, educated in an urban cultural environment, and who one day decided to sign up on a sailboat as a crewman to plough the waters of the fascinating Malayan archipelago.

How could young Coloane find a job on a ranch in Magellan? Who could he turn to? It was not long before an audacious idea occurred to him: he would offer to work for a legendary woman, the richest in Patagonia, one who had handled her business with an iron hand and surprising business sense. She would help him by giving him a job.

He went to work, then, for no less a personage than the renowned Sara Braun.

At the time the future writer and this moneyed woman eventually managed to have a brief encounter, she owned, jointly with her brother and associate Mauricio – actually, Moritz – the Sociedad Explotadora de Tierra del Fuego (The Tierra del Fuego Exploitation Society), with 1,376,160 hectares in Patagonia, 1,250,000 sheep, producing five million kilos of wool a year, 700 thousand kilos of leather and two and a half million kilos of meat and other byproducts, in addition to their maritime companies and multiple urban properties. This fabulous patrimony had been the result of a life not unacquainted with adventure, audacity, darkness and, above all, an innate business acumen. Her origins could hardly have been humbler: she was born in Latvia, to a Jewish family, during the time that region of Europe was under the dominion of Russia. Most likely, the Brauns were constrained to take the path to exile by the atrocious pogroms carried out by Czarist groups, and in 1864 they disembarked at Punta Arenas – a surprising choice, for sure, this absurd little harbor on the Magellan Strait, where everything was still to be done. Here she came ashore, in the company of her father, Elias Braun, a self-effacing tinsmith, her mother, Sofia Hamburger and her brother, Maurice.

All nature of legends have been told about Sara Braun's youth, though none have ever been confirmed. The most malicious hold she ran a brothel, while the mildest mention her being the mistress of several foreigners – at different times in her life. Yet others avow she was an innkeeper. In fact, Elias, her father, started business with a butcher's shop. But Sara was destined to a future of greatness, in a place at the very ends of the world where incredible fortunes were to be spawned in the wake of shady deals and land concessions, with the chance for unimaginable riches for those able to take advantage of the circumstances. Which she, undoubtedly, was. She married Portuguese José Nogueira, who had arrived in Punta Arenas without a penny to his name, and, along with a few other of the elect, had become a millionaire. Naturally, those who opted for this distant outpost in Magellan had an appetite for adventure, and

for unscrupulousness, or they would, otherwise, have chosen other less perilous, less harsh destinations, such as the United States, for instance.

In 1895, José Nogueira died in Arica and left all his worldly goods to his wife, Sara.

In the meantime, things had not been going too badly for her brother Maurice. At some stage in life he converted to Catholicism and married Josefina Menéndez Behety, one of the daughters of don José Menéndez, unquestionably the wealthiest man in Patagonia, thus merging two colossal fortunes.

But let us return to Francisco Coloane, determined to ring the bell at Sara Braun's house, opposite the plaza Muñoz Gamero, in Punta Arenas. This was, of course, no regular, unpretentious dwelling place, but rather a massive palace, built by French architect Numa Meyer in 1895. There, in the midst of nowhere, on the shores of the Magellan Strait, in a village in the process of leaving behind timber abodes to start building brick houses, José Nogueira's widow erected a fabulously elegant country house, in line with the most rigid of architectural principles required by the French *École des Beaux Arts*.

Surprisingly, Sara Braun received him. If there was anyone who had suffered penury in life, it was she, and perhaps the mere sight of this youth who approached her so humbly moved her, for all he wanted was a job on one of her Patagonian ranches. What this affluent landowner assuredly never suspected was that this young lad was to become one of the greatest of Chilean writers, though she did learn about it during her lifetime. How often must Sara Braun have remembered this modest youth who asked her for a job, and whom she helped to get a glimpse of arid, harsh, lonely Tierra del Fuego, an experience which would one day be transformed into unbelievably talented books.

Many years later, during an interview with Virginia Vidal, his biographer, Francisco Coloane recalled that first memorable meeting in surprising detail. "She was tall, and wore long skirts, with a majestic bearing that reminded me of Gabriela Mistral"<sup>1</sup>. The impact of that first interview must have been enormous. Let us try, for a moment, to imagine the scene, in a room in this unexpected palace in Punta Arenas, crowded with so many objects – in the best of horror vacui tradition – no doubt brought out from France: brocade-paneled walls, allegorical paintings, probably Louis XV style furniture, and an almost incandescent profusion of golds. And there, against that sumptuous background, emerged the stately figure of doña Sara Braun, this legendary woman, the wealthiest in Magellan, who might help him in his present predicament. Which was what she did. She wrote out a letter for him to give to one Mr. Gibbon, the administrator of the Estancia Sara ranch, in Tierra del Fuego, one of her numerous properties.

For little more than a year, Coloane worked as a Tierra del Fuego farmhand, which is no small matter as far as rigor is concerned: he was paid a meager wage and lived almost like a caveman, sharing tiny wooden sheds with other workers. But this in no way put him off. With that unrestrained energy of youth, hypnotized by the landscape and life in these southern confines of the world, he set to work; he was first assigned to planting oats, and a short time later, put in charge of the sheep, with one hundred farmhands under him. He proved he was not only capable of doing his work unimpeachably, but of withstanding one of the most inhospitable climes in the world. Some of the jobs were particularly unpleasant, such as gelding lambs, for the beasts' testicles were extirpated with a pair of tongs, but the task had to be finished off with the

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym of Lucila Godoy y Alcayaga, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1945.

teeth: human saliva cauterized the animal's wounds. Nothing seemed to faze Coloane and he did his work without complaint.

His fate, however, was not to perpetuate himself on a ranch lost in Tierra del Fuego. He worked at other establishments and some time later started out on what might be called his nautical stage, for he toured the Beagle channel and went on a journey in search of the training ship Baquedano, to Valparaiso. All these experiences were masterfully etched in a variety of novels and stories. Among these latter, there are some that are superb, such as Cabo de Hornos (Cape Horn), El témpano de Kanasaka (The Kanasaka Iceberg) and Golfo de Penas (Gulf of Penas).

One day he decided he had had enough of his Patagonian experience, and made his way to Santiago, where he started working as a journalist and devoted himself to writing for the rest of his days. His widest-read novel, *El último grumete de la Baquedano* [The Last Cabinboy on the Baquedano], was written at this time; the novel describes a journey on a ship, very similar to the one he had made, and contributed to hundreds of Chilean youths, thrilled by his prose, joining the Navy. Yet he never forgot Quemchi, where he returned on several occasions.

I set off for this town on my second journey to Chiloé, taking the gravel road across the stunning western coast, where one cannot refrain from entering San Antonio de Colo to admire the beautiful chapel or from stopping off to see the island of Aucar. I was actually intent on meeting Teolinda Higuera – a sister of Alejandro Higuera, the man who lived in Calén, in Renato Cárdenas' house. Teolinda was in charge of the Quemchi Municipal Library, and an almost fanatic admirer of Francisco Coloane. We lunched on the customary salmon and potatoes at a small restaurant built of wood, on one of the two parallel roads running down to the port, overlooking the sea.

"Coloane wrote *El camino de la ballena* [Path of the Whale] based on characters in Quemchi," Teolinda told me, "and there were several of my ancestors in it. He mentioned my great-grandmother. When he came here, while he was doing the Seminar in Ancud, he would often stay at my grandmother's, because his mother lived out in the country. Writers with strong bonds to a land are bound to be enriched by their ties to the people there, and what they have learnt from them. For Coloane, it was don Elías Yáñez who opened the doors onto a different world, with his tales of quests and adventures. Elías was several years his senior, which I suppose must have kindled his interest even further," she concluded.

Teolinda Higuera has a single-minded aim which has become a sort of obsession: to rebuild the Coloane home, once mounted on stilts on the seashore, but which is long since gone. When the writer was in Quemchi for the inauguration of the walkway to the island of Aucar, he made a detailed reproduction of his paternal home, and hired a local architect to prepare the blueprints, under his own supervision, for he was set on rebuilding it.

"The project is far from cheap," she adds, "because the house will have to be built over the water, and the walls will have to be given a special finish to avoid his books from getting ruined."

But apart from literature, and her interest in one of its major exponents, Teolinda is part of a project perhaps even more ambitious, one which, far from relating to the past, sets its sights on the future. Not long ago, she received a phone call from one of the main authorities in the large, surprisingly widespread, Chilean municipal library network; this woman was calling to provide her with top-secret information, a confidential affair of State. The richest man in the world, Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft was to be arriving in Quemchi one day not far in the future. Nobody was to know of this under any circumstance, and the call took on the significance of a pact



sealed in blood. What was the most powerful man on the planet about to do in Quemchi, of all places? The first idea that comes to mind is that he might be interested in some financial venture. Would he perhaps wish to revive the timber industry that, until the second half of the twentieth century, had made that port one of the most important timber export epicenters in South America? After all, the region had known better times, when the powerful Castoldi family had owned an enormous estate, until the agrarian reform was introduced by President Eduardo Frei, and led to the expropriation, and, predictably, to the subsequent disappearance of the estate. Or, mayhap he wished to invest strongly in the salmon industry, a more recent business that had brought an end to the family support system, for the young people prefer to work in the salmon fisheries instead of gathering seafood, despite being exploited and receiving insignificant pay.

In fact, Bill Gates wanted to visit Quemchi for other reasons. He was a personal friend of former Chilean President Ricardo Lagos, and between them they had thought up a revolutionary project for education in Chile: to provide 386 municipal libraries all over the country with state of the art computers, to include, among other things, access to Internet, on the basis of an intelligent and extremely complete program developed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This institution would thus donate 1,754 computers to be used free of charge by people in each community, and children in particular. This initiative was a far cry from those cyber-café chains where games, electronic mail, instant messaging or chat-rooms of dubious intention would eventually become the prime aim of the project. Bibliorredes: Abre tu Mundo (Booknets: Broaden your Outlook), which was the name given to the project, had a clear-cut, ambitious purpose aimed at educating future generations using the world-wide web and the wonders provided by a computing system. However, achieving these purposes would require education to be considered State policy, a priority over any other interests, and would demand a government willing to provide full support. All of which is not easy to attain in South America.

In Argentina, for instance, Martín Varsavsky, a young philanthropist and successful businessman belonging to a noteworthy family of Argentine scientists, and at the time living in Spain, created a program to link hundreds of Argentine schools via Internet, a project that was approved by then President Fernando de la Rúa. Varsavsky donated eleven million dollars so each school could have its own computers; the children and teenagers in his country of birth would have access to the education, training, and background essential to cope with the times ahead. He was not unaware of the fact that teaching in Argentina had been impoverished as a consequence of erratic educational policies – or the lack of them – during the most recent administrations. What this generous patron never expected was that he would have to deal with the appalling cultural ignorance of his fellow countrymen and with a corruption that had spread like gangrene throughout the government at all levels. This revolutionary initiative faded into nothing, along with the eleven million dollars he was never able to recover.

But Chile was not Argentina. The project would not run the risk, for instance, of the computers being stolen, as happened in Argentine schools; or worse still – just as an example of irreverence and savagery – bronze headstones being stolen from the cemetery to be melted down, or statues taken down from parks to be sold later on the black market. To President Lagos culture was a priority, and computing an extremely useful tool to achieve it. Chilean municipalities gradually reached out to children, providing them with the means to become familiar with computers and the latest technology. But Bill Gates, sharp-witted American businessman as he is, was not about to donate an unbelievable number of computers through the foundation he had created

without having a glimpse of the terrain. This meant he would have to travel to Chile to get in situ experience at some village where this new teaching system was to be implemented. He would, for a start, travel incognito. No television cameras, or interviews, or speeches, or decorations. His background and astounding career meant he had no time for rigorous protocol, and he preferred to avoid situations requiring ad hoc dress, and stilted conversation. These were the conditions he dictated before traveling to Chile. Unfortunately, there is no record of what cities he visited, if he did. The only thing we can be sure of is that he decided to visit a far-off village by the sea, known as Quemchi. Why he went there and not to Castro, Chonchi or Achao, which also have municipal libraries, must remain a mystery. What concerns us now is that one day Teolinda Higuera, in charge of a small, unassuming library, was informed that Bill Gates would be calling on that town.

Just imagine her perplexity. How could she keep the secret? Teolinda must have had to gag herself to restrain her excitement and not talk about it. If at least it had been an official visit, she might have rolled out red carpets, ordered flowers and purchased autochthonous gifts, all of which would have kept Quemchi in a kind of deliberative hyper-kinetic state. But this visit was more like a magic spell. In actual fact, I did not learn of the details of Bill Gates' visit to Quemchi through Teolinda, for even now she keeps the secret as though it were still classified information. But in Chiloé some facts had filtered down and in Castro I was given a couple of versions that concurred, and was to some extent able to reconstruct the details of this unanticipated visit.

Bill Gates arrived in a van, possibly from Puerto Montt. If he had chosen to travel by helicopter, for instance, from that city to the landing strip in Ancud, he would have been too visible and even obvious. Many would have wondered what was happening. And here is where irony steps in. The most powerful man in the world – not because he had discovered a gold mine or oil wells, but because he created a revolutionary system, a perfect product, his Microsoft Windows – crossed over the Chacao channel in a common ferry, mixing with tourists and tradesmen, perhaps admiring the landscape and taking photos. Who among the passengers could imagine that this gringo was the greatest impresario in the world? He was simply another tourist, among all those who appear at certain times of the year, and deserving no particular attention. After stopping off at Chacao the van took the asphalt road to Ancud, then turned off towards Castro and, in Degan, took the paved winding road ending in Quemchi. We cannot know what Bill Gates must have felt when confronted with the uncommonly beautiful scenery of Chiloé, and can but imagine what he must have said. We can suppose, though, how Teolinda felt as she waited impatiently at the library, unable to utter a word, inhibited by the iron-clad instructions of keeping absolute silence, of not confiding even to her closest what was about to happen in this tiny harbor. It is likely she furtively kept her eye on her wristwatch, for she could not even show her restlessness or impatience. At long last, the van parked outside the front door of the municipal library.

Bill Gates, the man at the top of the list of the wealthiest men in the world, wore jeans, tennis shoes and a short-sleeved T-shirt. He quietly and unassumingly greeted the people working or simply reading in the library, as though he were just another tourist, and asked to be shown round. One could not have imagined this man in any situation other than getting out of a Rolls Royce. Yet he hardly registered in the minds of the people there. Whoever would have supposed that this Yankee tourist, dressed in the typical hitchhiker's uniform was the world's greatest celebrity? Teolinda and a small group of people must have taken him round the library, made entirely of wood. It is an old-fashioned, two-storey building located on an inner road, with several typically

Chilote-style rooms, in other words rustic and unpretentious. This was no courtesy visit. Bill Gates could have come and gone with no further explanations. But this was not what he wanted. He walked round each of the rooms, asking a variety of questions, and was apparently satisfied with what he found in this tiny cultural island space, in addition to books. For here activity translated into exhibitions, talks, plays, music, arts and crafts, and even a Memory Corner, where a tiny museum preserved the traditions of Chiloé. Doubtless, Bill Gates must have felt that all that was missing there was precisely what he had invented and come to provide.

He left in the same way he had come, without solemnity or words of protocol.

The inevitable question, of course, is why Bill Gates would choose to visit Chiloé. One would have expected him to travel to one of the northern cities, like Iquique, or a southern location, like Punta Arenas. Yet this was not so. Nor is it likely it was a coincidence, as though he had spun the globe and jabbed a random finger at some point in Chile. The only possible explanation is that he preferred to confront his world, the word of revolutionary technology that opened up unlimited possibilities for mankind, against the primitive universe of a Chilean island. What good would it have done him to visit a city with thousands of computers, which would but reflect his own image in the mirror? Coming overland to Quemchi, climbing unbelievably steep slopes, it is likely that the mere sight of this enchanting fishing hamlet with only two roads and but a few wooden boats clinched his decision: this was the kind of place he wanted to reach, a somewhat isolated, remote village, where it was likely people had never even heard of him or of Microsoft. He came in search of a contrast with his own world... and he found it.

As was to be expected, the project prospered and *Bibliorredes: Abre tu Mundo*, the ambitious dream spawned by the richest man on the planet and the president of a South American country came true. The first time I went to a municipal library in Chile was in Chonchi, and I never even suspected I would find a special room with five state of the art computers, normally used by children and teenagers, but placed freely at the service of anyone interested in using them. It was the person in charge of the library who spoke to me of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the program implemented in Chile. How useful I found that library, despite the fact that Chonchi had a cyber-shop with Internet access. There was an atmosphere of concentration, of peace and quiet, diametrically opposed to the computer booths or cyber cafés, with the deafening noise of virtual games, children shouting, and keyboards where there was no way of reading the letters or signs on the keys after hundreds of hours of use and abuse by legions of young people. And, something no less important, the library had blocked access to adult sites and strictly supervised the kind of chatting and instant messaging that went on among the children at each of the machines. I also found this atmosphere of quietness and meditation at the municipal libraries in Achao and Quemchi, and assume it must be so in the rest of Chile.

But Bill Gates' visit was to have an epilogue of sorts, which might well be included in the traditional rules of comedy, and which would have delighted a playwright. A short time later it was officially announced that his wife, Melinda Gates, would pay a visit to Quemchi. There was still time, but innumerable preparations were required, as well as the rigorous study of the appropriate protocol. Though not a foreign authority, the wife of the wealthiest man in the world could not be welcomed without a well-prepared ceremony, scheduled visits, a tour of the area, all of which could turn into a terrible headache if not properly organized. The mayor of Quemchi must have set to work like a maniac to ensure there was not even the slightest slip. For everything involved a complication to the authorities, from the kind of lunch they should serve to

whether it would be better to take her out for a boat-ride or for a car-ride in the hills. Not to mention, of course, how proud they must have been about Melinda Gates also having chosen Quemchi of all the options provided by Chile. Ancient glories seemed to revive, as though they were in the apogee of the timber economy cycle. New life would be breathed into Francisco Coloane's birthplace. They would, of course, give their illustrious guest a couple of books by this famous writer, and prepare written material summarizing the town's history, traditions and events. Activity must have been feverish, for everyone was eager not to omit even the minutest of details that might cause a bad impression. Mrs. Gates was to leave the place feeling delighted, as though she had visited a magic location she would never be able to forget. We are unaware of the proposals put forward but supposedly, like her husband, she wanted little publicity, without crowds and reporters. A quiet visit, providing time enough to see the library, have lunch and go out in a boat.

The day finally came. Little is known about the occasion, and nobody in Quemchi is willing to talk frankly about it, as though it were better simply to forget all about it. The reason might be sought in the farcical situations in life. But it might be better to take it one step at a time, for it was like a theater play, with a practically perfect handling of the transitions, the characters and even the obligatory scene some playwrights so often resort to. And, like in any comedy of errors, the ending was entirely unexpected, and left the audience breathless.

Melinda Gates arrived in the same way as her husband had done, with no pomp or ceremony. She was welcomed by the mayor and prominent members of the community, visited the library, and then set off on boat-ride organized for the afternoon. It was a brilliant choice, for the coast and islands boast of unusual beauty. They must have hugged the coast of the island of Caucahue, while telling her it had also been visited by Darwin; then they probably sailed on close to Aucar and most likely, if visibility was good, pointed out each of the continental volcanoes looming up on the horizon. And there on board the vessel the shattering fiat lux took place, leaving the woman's hosts aghast. We are unaware of what or how it came to light, but the fact was that Melinda Gates was not Melinda Gates. Some mix-up, some perverse misunderstanding had led them to believe their guest was the wife of the powerful impresario, when she was, in fact, simply an officer of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. High-ranking, granted, but far from being the promised star. The mayor, the government officials and the prominent community representatives must have made every effort to attach no importance to this marine drama, or to keep from bursting into laughter at their blunder. Fortunately, the entire matter had been kept quiet, and little publicity had been given to her coming. Imagine the front page headlines in *El Llanquihue*, an important Puerto Montt daily, or in *El Mercurio*, in Santiago, if this visit had been announced with all the pageantry, and it had been discovered while out on a boat that this person who had been the center of attention, who had attracted all eyes, and been photographed with everyone who mattered so they could immortalize her in a silver frame, whom they had chatted to, with the help of an interpreter, and who throughout the sojourn had behaved absolutely *comme il faut*, was not the one they had expected.

None of this happened, providentially, and the arrival of Melinda Gates' alter ego simply became a sublime anecdote never to be forgotten by the inhabitants of Quemchi.

After leaving Chiloé on my second trip, and having already arrived in Frutillar, I decided to return to the island on the spur of the moment with my son, just for the day. Once again I crossed the Chacao channel and we made our way to Quemchi, as though

attracted by some strange magnet. That magnetic force was no doubt the result of an unpardonable omission, for I had not visited the island of Aucar, or the Tenaun church. I could not leave Chile without having seen them. We lunched at the same restaurant where I had met Teolinda Higuera, savoring that matchless salmon and potatoes, with its inevitable seafood consommé. Oddly, the sun had come out, after several weeks of overcast skies, rains and wind, though in Chiloé this does not necessarily mean the weather will improve. It was no easy matter to find the entrance to the walkway crossing over to Aucar, for it requires traversing a salmon fishery to get to the beach. We eventually found this five hundred meter long bridge, so often patched up, but now dilapidated and in sore need of repair. It is not easy to cross over it, with the missing planks and slippery moss, and it is only the fact that it is not very high, and the sea is quite shallow in this area that leads people on. How apt Francisco Coloane had been in dubbing it “the island of the sailing souls”, for it is precisely that, in other words, the complete opposite of the artificiality of some cemeteries bent on imitating nature and able only to achieve a crude copy, with a merely cosmetic approximation. The diffidence of the tombstones, the long grass, which though neglected, in no way aesthetically disturbs this holy ground, the multiplicity of trees, all turn it into a rare mortuary. Perhaps Coloane’s children should bring the relics of this incomparable writer to this place he loved.

Then, at long last, I got to know Tenaun. As happens on other places on this coast – such as Calén, San Juan – the descent by car is like a prolonged air pocket in some of the roughest flights I have made. It is worth noting that in years gone by one would have reached these places by sea, thus avoiding these precipitous slopes, which can only be negotiated in a four-wheel drive vehicle. Tenaun, though dating far back in history, and despite being mentioned in any historical account, is negligible in size. It is infinitely smaller than Quemchi, yet it was there Chillpila dazzled Moraleda with her magic spells, making the tide rise and fall, and doña Ana Werner de Bahamonde, in the sprawling old house that still takes up an entire corner, welcomed presidents and dreamed of having electricity. And then the church, bizarrely painted pale blue, with three towers, and two stars over the portico – the only church located diagonally opposite the sea. Perhaps to make it quite clear that it is unique of its kind.

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## THE STRUGGLE FOR THE TERRITORIES

Paved roads in Chiloé tend to share a particularity that makes them extremely dangerous: there is no shoulder on the road, which makes it difficult – or well nigh impossible – to park a vehicle at the side of the road. This is partly due to the unpredictable topography, with slopes and curves that turn them into narrow, winding ribbons, but is also the result of the proliferation of a small thorny bush known locally as *espinillo*, introduced towards the end of the nineteenth century by German colonists. Though in spring its pretty yellow flowers enhance the beauty of the landscape, it has become a plague, and has ended up choking up the roads. These small road-walls, similar to the walls dotting the northern region of Devon, in England, make it almost hopeless to try and stop on a journey. Yet this was exactly the situation I found myself in one rainy morning towards the end of November while I was driving along Road 5 – or, to give it its proper name, the Pan-American road – towards Quellón, in other words, heading straight for the rigors of the south. To make matters worse, this area was right in the heart of indigenous territory, or rather territory belonging to the Huilliches, a millenary tribe which in latter years seemed to have re-kindled their ancestral claims, standing up for their rights with particular vehemence.

The target of my trip on this occasion was Compu, an ancient settlement where there had once been Spanish *encomiendas*, where I had an appointment with the most senior authority of the Consejo General de Caciques (General Indian Chieftain Council) of Buta Huapi Chilhue, a memorable institution presided over by don Carlos Lincoman, who bears the title of Lonco Mayor, which is simply another way of saying “boss”. But before immersing ourselves any further into this world, I would like to point out that the Indians’ possession of land on the island never has been and never will be easy. Over the centuries they have suffered all manner of ill-treatment at the hands of the white men, and, to the detriment of their cause, these natives have split up into irreconcilable factions, and are permanently at war for ideological and economical reasons. This is, perhaps, one of the characteristics of Latin America, where peoples rarely march in unison towards a single objective, with clear, well-defined aims. There is, instead, always somebody who “has the insight”, one who suffers from a virus that wreaks havoc on the population and, particularly, on the political class: ideology. Be it right-wing, left-wing, neo-liberalism, guerrilla, statism, populism, militarism, they all make up a frustratingly complex, sterile jigsaw hindering growth and development.

Land in Chiloé could not but be involved in those circular changes in fortune, so frequently far from beneficial.

When the Spaniards eventually came to the archipelago with the intention of settling and not merely to continue with their exploratory voyages, that is, around mid-sixteenth century, they thought up an ingenious system to make use of those peaceful, rudimentary Indians, so easily dazzled by the glittering display of European culture. For not only did the Spaniards take over their lands, but their very lives. They created a

system known as the *encomienda*, an arrangement under which the Indian was forced to work for several months a year for the *encomendero*, in exchange for a meager wage, and appalling treatment. Native women and children were not exempt from this system of exploitation. One of the problems was that most of the *encomenderos* were Spanish soldiers, which is a clear indication of their education (or lack of it) and the hands these Huilliches had fallen into. On February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1712, there was an uprising among the Indians, embittered by the exploitation, deprivation and degradation they had been submitted to. They sought not only an end to the *encomienda* system, but the return of the lands that had been seized off them. As the original inhabitants of Chiloé they had been related to this earth for over thirteen thousand years, molding it and creating their own myths around it. The Spanish Crown did, of course, intervene, in an attempt to avoid abuse. But what could the weakened house of Bourbon do from Madrid, geographically poles apart from Chiloé? They did forbid child labor, but the *encomenderos* continued to disobey any orders coming from the metropolis. Who could control what was happening at the ends of the earth? Suffice it to imagine how long any royal instructions would take to reach these lands, considering the enormous distances separating Spain and the south of Chile. Who would enforce them? As might be expected, the *encomenderos* simply ignored the Crown.

But the Huilliches were not about to leave it at that. Anticipating Mahatma Gandhi by a century and a half, they set in motion their “peaceful resistance”. They did not embark on vicious attacks as the Araucano Indians had done in Osorno, but displayed instead an attitude perhaps less spectacular, though far more clever. The Indians simply gave up the agricultural tasks they were expected to do, or carried them out with exasperating slowness, or else they simply stopped transporting food to the islands and the haciendas. This complicated things for the *encomenderos*, from Chacao, in the north, to Huilad, in the far south. This situation lasted for several decades, with the *encomenderos* who did not want to lose any of their privileges, and the Huilliches who ever more vehemently refused to be exploited and demanded the restoration of their lands. It was once again the intervention of the Church in Chile that tipped the scales in favor of the Indians. Unable and unwilling to condone the inhuman treatment and abuse, the church put pressure on the Crown to bring this destructive economic system to an end.

On March 26<sup>th</sup>, 1783, *encomiendas* were definitively abolished in Chiloé.

Over two hundred years had elapsed, and very few of the Huilliches’ appeals had been listened to or resolved. Now, as I approached Compu, along the edge of a broad marsh, I tried to locate the home of don Carlos Lincoman, senior authority of the Consejo General de Caciques [General Indian Chieftain Council], a far from easy task, for, as I have mentioned on several occasions, houses are few and far between. To make matters worse, there was no shoulder on the road, and I had nowhere to park my car safely. On a gravel road, this might not be so important, but here, on road 5, with the salmon trucks driving by at crazy speed carrying containers with produce, it was equivalent to almost certain death. After asking several people, I located the Lonco Mayor’s abode, a modest house under repair, with no glass in the windows, which had been covered by makeshift polythene screens. A few meters away a tiny wooden cabin served as an office.

Don Carlos, who is over eighty, is surprisingly courteous and articulate. He was wearing a grey beret that matched the color of his sweater, which had a white stripe around the waist that seemed to split him in two. This tall, thin man claims a sort of nobility title, with its attendant lands and rights. He is far from being a prince or duke, for this would be but a crude copy of European customs, which they have had to endure

for centuries. But his capacity as Lonco Mayor to some extent provides him with feudal rights: he is, he assured me, the only representative legitimately entitled to deal with and solve the problem of the natives in Chiloé, and he does not hesitate to disqualify other vernacular organisms. I might mention in passing that he is practically on a war footing with one of these, the Federación de Comunidades Huilliches de Chiloé [Chiloé Huilliche Communities Federation]. His rights actually derive from the creation in 1936 of the Consejo General de Caciques, founded by Juan Fermín Lemuy Teumún, which has since fought – albeit unsuccessfully – to get the Chilean government to grant them property deeds.

“We are laying claim to fifty seven thousand hectares that belong to us,” declared don Carlos Lincoman. “They comprise the Coigüin estate, in Compu. Nothing has been respected here, and history shows that, in the Tantauco Treaty, signed in 1826, the Spanish Crown granted the indigenous population the lands they had lived on for so long in Chiloé.

The situation is intriguing, to say the least. These fifty seven thousand hectares are in the hands of Lincoman who exercises his own sort of exploitation with the indigenous community he has created. What Lincoman does not have are the title deeds over these lands. Yet no one dares to evict them, precisely because of the impact this would cause in the media. This number of hectares is insignificant, though, if compared to what actually belongs to them, according to the Consejo General de Caciques. One would have to speak of at least eight hundred thousand hectares. But Lincoman is not unaware of who will eventually get to keep the lands.

“The problem is there are people with a lot of money who end up taking over our lands under the cover of their companies,” he said.

The Chilean government has not hesitated to hand over vast expanses of land to Americans, like Jeremiah Henderson who, as previously mentioned, is the owner of thousands of hectares. This had already happened back in 1968, when four hundred thousand hectares of supposedly fiscal lands were sold to Count Timoleón de la Taille-Trétinville, covering practically the entire south of Chiloé, and based in Puerto Carmen.

“Count de la Taille,” pointed out Lincoman, “was a sensible man, or at least much more so than current entrepreneurs. He, at least, would talk to the Indian chiefs and learn about the kind of problems they had. Since he died the current owners have had practically no dialogue at all with the Council.”

What the do companies do have, though, are extremely efficient lobbyists and strong political connections that allow them to continue plundering island resources. These influences are entirely unaware of any theory of sustainable development, and simply out to make enormous gains – fast; ecological balance is the last thing on their minds. In the past, the lack of any forest protection policy endangered unique and extremely valuable species that take centuries to grow, bringing them close to extinction. The larch (*fitzroia cupressoides*) was the timber workers’ favorite target, for they cared little about the future of this tree, or, to be more benign in our judgment, had no environmental awareness to make them wish to preserve this unique tree that grows one millimeter in diameter every three years, and whose most ancient specimen dates back three thousand six hundred years, a life span exceeded only by the Californian pine. It is currently forbidden to cut down larch trees, which can only be marketed if the trees are dead; needless to say, this is still done because controls are lax. However, it is not simply the larch that is in danger, but other species too.

“Companies cut down the forest trees indiscriminately,” complained Lincoman. “The chips, or splinters are what are worth most, and are made with pressed or agglomerated timber. The paradox is that the Huilliches are fined for cutting down trees.



Actually, the government should allow us to cut them down: we know how to do it, and which ones should be felled.”

The Coigüin estate is, to all appearances, a community asset administered by don Carlos Lincoman. Ideologically speaking, a fifty seven thousand hectare expanse of land where indigenous families live and work under a Consejo General de Caciques made up of twenty eight communities sounds impressive, for this would seem to be the perfect example of unity and work among people of the same origin, without foreign interference, avoiding lands being sold – and this is how it must have been prior to the arrival of the Spaniards. But Lincoman has enemies both within and without the government. The Illustrious Municipality of Quellón, with its development and communication apparatus, cannot stand the sight of him. The timber companies detest him. The Chiloé Federation of Huilliche Communities see him as a rival who can do nothing to improve the life and production processes of small land-owners. His multiple detractors are more than willing to throw accusations at his head. An estate of such size requires absolutely transparent administration, regular audits, records of what is done with the money, and not an economic leadership typical of Latin American caudillos, where no accounts are given as to what goes in and out of the coffers. Evil-intentioned gossip declares there is no proof as to what has happened to money and machinery donated by different organizations. Others say nepotism is rife, that a sawmill was assigned to one of the Cacique’s friends, or even worse, that two bulls given to the community had been eaten.

The list of accusations could go on forever, and it is difficult to establish the truth of the matter.

The only thing that is certain is that Lincoman, and his Consejo General de Caciques, provide work as well as financial, physical and spiritual aid to those who form part of the estate and to affiliated communities, which is no small thing.

The cloud around the property records is part of Chiloé history. This is due partly to the administration having depended on Lima, which made it difficult to keep track of any records. Then, a fire destroyed the office where some of these records were filed. However, a history review would lead to incredibly simple deductions. It is incontestable that during colonial times the Spanish Crown conferred Royal Titles on the Chiloé Huilliches, which would, a priori, mean there is no need for them to prove they are officially the owners of the land. As if this were not proof enough, the lands located in the south of the island, in the region of Quellón, were subjected to surveys and the corresponding title deeds were then issued; these title deeds for the Royal Pastures – as they were called – are on file at the Real Property Archive in Castro.

When Chile declared its independence from Spain, the Huilliches found allies in the new Republican government. It was unimaginable that the newly appointed authorities, imbued with the ideas of the French Revolution, should not recognize the rights of a people who inhabited a lost island in the Pacific. The Tantauco Treaty, signed on January 15<sup>th</sup> 1826, which brought an end to the war between Chileans and Spaniards, was quite clear on this subject, declaring in article 7 that the assets and properties of the Chiloé inhabitants, recognized by the Royal Titles, would be inviolably respected. A prior law, dating back to 1823, signed by Ramón Freire, who would later evict the Spaniards from Chiloé, and by Mariano Egaña – which law was later to be known as the Freire law – unequivocally reinforced the rights of the Huilliches, ensuring them their property was “safe to perpetuity”.

However, in those years, Chiloé was but a remote archipelago, with no gold or silver mines, entirely covered in forests, primitive and painfully poor, and hardly attractive from the commercial viewpoint. It was little more than a port of call for

daring seamen who depended on the wind to drive their vessels. But towards the end of the nineteenth century, the use of steam and boilers on new embarkations began to increase their speed, to some extent shortening distances, for they could go further in less time; this opened up unsuspected business opportunities, and rendered raw materials, particularly in South America, of invaluable worth. The age of “commodities”, of adventurers, of bribable governments, of large corporations that would stop at nothing, was being ushered in, and it was thus that this remote austral island by the name of Chiloé became an ideal target for foreign rapacity. Its timber production had no parallel. Where else could one find such quality, and an unlimited number of larches and manius to cut down indiscriminately? European businessmen, and some unscrupulous Chileans felt they had come upon the supreme opportunity of their lives, provided they had the consent of the Chilean government, which could be arranged with the appropriate legal niceties. It was an uncharacteristic time, as though Europe had discovered that the raw materials in South America were vital to their industries and, in the southern hemisphere, a handful of what would be known today as entrepreneurs discovered other mounts Potosí. This era of “progress” likewise led to fortunes being made overnight. It had happened in Bolivia, with tin; in the north of Chile, with saltpeter; in the Amazon, with rubber; in Magellan, with wool and meats. Why should not the same thing happen in Chiloé? All that was needed was a spearhead, a gap to let in the new rules of the game the world over. Who would even care about a people like the Huilliches, ignored by the rest of the world, and lacking representation even inside Chile?

The wall that had protected the archipelago was pierced on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1896, when a Trojan Horse-style entry was made, bearing in its interior a legal text that dealt a death-blow to the Chilotes. By a Law of the Republic, the Chilean State undertook to hand over one hundred thousand hectares in Chiloé to private persons. Their noble purpose could not have been more pristine: to colonize these lands with foreigners. Needless to say, the government would have to resort to certain legal loopholes to tear down the ancestral rights of the Huilliches on most of the territory. What they actually did was to register three quarters of the Castro department and twelve islands as fiscal lands. They did, however, provide a legal period of time for those involved to voice their opposition in the event they felt their rights had been breached. This bold-faced opportunism, this juridical humbug was deliberately thought up taking Huilliche ignorance for granted, supposing they were unaware of what had happened. Let us just imagine for a moment these native peoples living in primitive villages, towards the end of the nineteenth century, and having to resort to justice. It was practically like asking them to fly to the moon. What could they know of legal recourses, lawyers, tribunals and anything else required to be able to keep their lands. Nor can we be naïve enough to suppose the Chilean government and parliament were moved by ideals of progress, for it was clear enough they had discovered this was a business with much to be gained. This step, which in this scenario might well be called in chess King’s Indian Defense, opened up a path for knights, bishops and towers that eventually destroyed what little was left of the ethnic walls. The Chilean state treasury took over 172,986 hectares, including the Compu, Yaldad and Coinco fields, among others. The only one who managed to avoid this pandemonium was Justo Llancalahuen, proprietor of the Coldita estate, whose lands had not been registered under fiscal territories because he was able to produce the required title deeds.

But this was just the beginning of the story. Just as a worm invading a computer produces effects after a certain amount of time, this fiscal registration led to the lands simply being allocated to the best bidder, which happened in 1907. It was then the first

of those devouring enterprises so typical of South America at that time emerged: the Sociedad Austral de Maderas (Southern Timber Company). This octopus was to change both in name and appearance on multiple occasions, and from the first took action with remarkable corporate speed, embarking on a multiplicity of activities, creating new corporations with the Huilliche lands as their security, but, oddly enough, they were never able to evict the Huilliches from them. The indigenous families would not budge, and materially continued to own the land.

The Sociedad Austral de Maderas was wound up in 1918 and the Comunidad Quellón [Quellón Community] soon came into being, coincidentally formed by three families that had done fabulous business with the powers that be, and are part of the history of Punta Arenas: Braun, Blanchard and Díaz Contardi. The company did not last long and in 1925 the decision was taken to change the company's name – and disguise. It would now be the Sociedad Explotadora de Chiloé (Chiloé Development Company), as voracious and unscrupulous as those that had preceded it.

The arguments raging around land and its possession in Chiloé have reached theological proportions. Unfortunately, there have been no ecumenical councils – like that held at Nicea, for instance – to try and reach agreement, nor an emperor like Constantine to organize a memorable encounter among all the bishops. Instead, anathemas seethe in their worst forms, precisely because the differences between the two Huilliche groups are profound and far from easy to resolve. In Castro, the Federación de Comunidades Huilliches de Chiloé [Chiloé Huilliche Communities Federation] has an office in an unassuming wooden house on calle Thompson, located in the center of a square, at the end of a long, narrow passageway. It is entirely different, both in appearance and in activity, to the cabin where don Carlos Lincoman entertained me: an agriculturer from Tara (no connection with Scarlett O'Hara) receives reports as to intruders who cut down trees clandestinely, while a surprisingly brisk young secretary performs clerical duties.

There is another kind of atmosphere here; firstly, perhaps, because it is located in a city the size of Castro, and then, of course, because of the unsolvable theological differences. Lincoman, as a descendant and heir of the Indian chieftains, establishes feudal, hegemonic rules to administer a fifty seven thousand hectare estate; Sergio Cuyul Cuyul, president of the Federación, seeks to help the natives develop projects of their own and get the title deeds for their paltry hectares. On the other hand, the office conveys a working and verbal rhythm that is totally contrary to gerontocracy: the chairman is thirty-five and his advisors cannot be much older. Why should this organization have emerged when there was already another in the form of the Consejo General de Caciques? For the simple reason that a large group of indigenous producers never received an answer to their demands.

“We made several attempts to approach the Council,” Sergio Cuyul Cuyul told me, “but unfortunately, we were simply disregarded. They said we had to comply with several requirements we were in no way prepared to accept. For instance, to join the Council, we would have had to pay the cacique a very high fee. We felt they were taking advantage of us.

What could be done, then, to group those Huilliches who were dissatisfied with Lincoman and did not wish to belong to an estate several thousand hectares in size, and were content simply to have a small plot of land they could call their own, where they could work and develop projects without depending on anyone else. Not many years

ago Cuyul Cuyul thought of creating a federation, but lacked the financial wherewithal and the required connections, though there was no lack of people willing to cooperate with him, who supported him right from the time the idea of this notable initiative first took root in his mind. He had neither the time nor the money, but this did not distract him from his main purpose. He could not even pay the bus fare to travel from one point of the island to another, and had to resort to hitching rides. It was a lengthy time that involved sowing the seeds of the idea, and required persuasion, organization, and fearful uncertainty. More than once he must have wondered whether the effort was worth it, and whether the formation of an entity opposed in every sense to the Consejo General de Caciques, undoubtedly an iron-fisted establishment set on working and recovering Chilote lands, would have any chances of success.

One day the miracle occurred. A Swiss multi-millionaire heard of the existence of a group of Huilliches fighting to create something new, and decided to lend them a hand. This was no mere subsidy, for the philanthropist did not finance administrations but rather leaders supporting sustainable development, who approached certain companies and were socially and environmentally responsible. It was thus the new federation received one hundred thousand dollars, for a two-year period, to be used in implementing their project. From the very first, Cuyul Cuyul established profound differences both as regards Federation philosophy and its management.

“We wanted to do just the opposite of what the Consejo General de Caciques does,” he declared. “Avoid hegemony, ensure our accounts are transparent, provide equal opportunities for members of both sexes, propose alternatives for Huilliche development, be democratic and keep away from anything smacking of secretiveness or authoritarianism.”

The idea of a large estate, actually thousands of hectares of land, managed by a single person, and shared by a large number of Huilliches does not satisfy the members of the Federación. They consider the world has changed, that democratic spirit is important and that, as a people they have the right to possess health centers, schools, colleges, companies, and, above all, their maximum aspiration is to have a government of their own, such as parallel government councils. The group he presides over has sent young Huilliches to study at college in the hopes these youngsters will return with knowledge that can be applied to their situation. Yet the terminology Cuyul Cuyul uses is unusual. Concepts such as “sustainable development” or “transparency” are not normally spoken about in these areas, where corporate discourse and communication techniques seem to form part of their new lives. This might also be due to arrival of globalization, which, truth to say, is not so bad.

At times, listening to him discussing certain topics causes an odd sense of perplexity, perhaps because he is so naïve. The Federación has set itself some feasible aims, however there are others that seem terribly hard to attain, inevitably requiring confrontation with powerful business and political interests. For it is not only the lands they are laying claim to. They are demanding the return of other resources, such as lakes, lagoons and rivers, and, naturally, the sea. Which is why they do not speak of lands but of territories.

“Chiloé suffers from one of the worst forms of racism,” Cuyul Cuyul points out, “which is oversight – what I mean is that the society dominating us simply does not see us. Even though we are a majority we paradoxically lack representation.

The Federación is made up of twenty-five indigenous communities, covering a total of twenty-five thousand hectares. Some of the smaller communities have no more than two hundred hectares, while other larger ones may have four thousand. On the way to Quellón there is a minute settlement known as Molulco and I must confess I had no

difficulty in leaving my car at the edge of the road or in locating Micaela Mañao, a Huilliche “official” who has been untiringly active in her area. She lives in a house at the foot of a hill, and came out to meet me, clearly curious about this obviously foreign caller. Some inexplicable lapsus linguae made me say I had come on behalf of don Carlos Lincoman, when I had actually learned of her existence through an official at the Quellón municipality. The mere mention of Lincoman’s name transformed her face, as though I had mentioned Satan himself. Micaela took a deep breath, as though rallying her strength, and looked off towards the mountains, as though trying to shut her ears to a blasphemy.

“I hate him!” she exclaimed.

I realized the mistake I had made, and apologized, telling her who had actually sent me here. She smiled, visibly relieved, and invited me into her house: we sat round a table in a spacious room entirely made of wood. I learnt she was fifty, and that, like most Huilliches, had been surprisingly fertile, for she had eleven children, and had brought up another four who weren’t her own. She had been living in Molulco for thirty-eight years and “owned” over fifty hectares, the title deed of which, as so often happens among the Huilliches, is not in her name. This sort of perpetually insecure ownership seemed to dog the footsteps of most of these natives, a problem no government appears to be prepared to resolve, and which is exploited by the fishing companies and the salmon and forestry industry.

“This is never-ending,” Micaela mourns, referring to the way lands are awarded and title deeds distributed. “Quite near here, up there in Yerba Loza, they are granting lands to people who don’t own them and who are not even living on the premises.”

Those who do not see eye to eye with Lincoman accuse him of “not being transparent” in the way he uses the money produced or received by the Coigüin estate. It is, thus, not surprising that he should be the target every day of charges connected with his feudalism. The feud between the Consejo General de Caciques and the Federación de Comunidades Huilliches de Chiloé, though supposedly ideological in nature is in actual fact economical, and does but weaken the ancestral claims of the indigenous peoples. The concept of “divide and rule” has found no more fertile soil: while they accuse each other and become involved in petty, hair-splitting arguments as to the convenience of an apparently communitarian estate or a smaller estate with development projects, enormous extensions of forests are being sold off to foreign companies, and each cove on the island is assigned to a different salmon fishery. But so is Latin America. It is almost utopian to seek to unify ideologies and actions.

But Micaela Mañao is a pragmatist, far removed from intellectual dueling, a woman who prefers to solve problems. Only a short time later we made our way to Molulco, just a few hundred yards from her home, and nothing but a handful of outbuildings along the edge of road 5. With palpable pride she showed me a school and a kindergarten, which might be nothing extraordinary as such, were it not for the fact that she had donated the land for them to be built. This tiny hamlet lies squarely in the most conflictive area of Chiloé, in other words, the south of the island, where there is a stronger and more combative Huilliche presence. In contrast to the northern coast, or towns like Castro or Dalcahue that were occupied by the Spaniards and the Jesuits, until late nineteenth century the lands close to the Pirulil cordillera were considered as the ends of the earth. Their only inhabitants were the indigenous peoples. The South American raw materials boom, however, was relentless even in this region, and towards the end of the nineteen twenties, the Sociedad Explotadora de Chiloé began to deploy its tentacles in an effort to take over all those lands. The catalyst, ironically enough, was a law passed in 1931 to favor the Huilliches, known as the Austral Property Law. This

legal text allowed anyone alleging they had properties in the south of Chile to submit their title deeds to the Treasury, in addition to proving the land was registered at the Castro Real Property Archive, among other requirements. It would be tedious to go into each of the articles included under the law, but suffice it to say the Huilliches suddenly felt the sun had come out from behind the clouds: at last the Chilean state would recognize their ancestral dominions.

Alas, they did not anticipate the diabolical speed of the Sociedad Explotadora de Chiloé, acting perhaps under the advice of the best Chilean attorneys. With legal subtleties and other non sancta actions, the company attained recognition of the title deeds, and overnight appropriated the lands in Yaldad, Coigüin, Coldita, Coinco and, as though this were not enough, also took over the Guaipulli and Huequetrumao estates, which had formerly belonged to the Huilliches. The company used every ploy imaginable to achieve its aims, from attempting to register those who occupied the lands as employees or tenants to avowing they themselves were responsible for improvements actually carried out by the Indians. This blow must have been devastating to the Huilliches, who probably saw it as a secular nightmare repeated over and over ad nauseum. It was obvious the Chilean government would not do anything for them either at that time or ever; there were powerful interests that always ended up winning the hand. For the Sociedad Explotadora de Chiloé, however, victory turned out to be a costly business: the natives refused to hand over their possessions, and have so far stood their ground in an attitude which seems to be the only one to achieve effective results.

In the mid-1930s the Huilliches decided to organize their resistance by creating an institution, and appointing chiefs or lonkos to represent them. A meeting held in Trincao in 1934 led to the strategy they would subscribe to throughout the twentieth century: never would they be evicted from their ancestral lands. The amount of legal measures and countermeasures, the backtracking, and chopping and changing can be grueling, as was the appearance and disappearance of the Sociedad Explotadora de Chiloé, four hundred thousand hectares of which were eventually purchased by count Timoleón de la Taille-Trétinville in 1968.

The rights acquired by don Carlos Lincoman derive from that indigenous summit meeting, though many declare the authentic heir was somebody else who was working in Argentina. When he returned to claim his rights he was simply unable to unseat Lincoman. If we stop to think about the reversals of fortune the Huilliches have undergone since the arrival of the Spaniards, including the republican stage and the business era, it is hard to explain how they have subsisted and still kept up their fighting mettle. When the territory of Chiloé was annexed to Chile in 1826, the government took the first initiatives to destroy their ethnic roots, suppressing their native language and imposing Spanish as the only acceptable language. The argument put forward was that it was necessary to create a single State, uniform, coherent and under a single flag, which, of course, was no more than a pretext. The natives, both for Spaniards and republicans, were never anything more than a troublesome reality, culturally inferior beings. How could one compare a Huilliche, with his short stature and rudimentary attire, his guttural speech and absurd beliefs in mythological beings, to an inhabitant from Santiago, with his urban perfection? The Catholic church, on the other hand, though willing to defend the natives from the abuses of the encomenderos, was not prepared to tolerate even the least pagan ceremony, for instance the ngillatun, the central festivity among Mapuche peoples. With the indigenous propensity towards cultural religious feasts, the Church felt it was timely to replace them with the patron feasts, and thus harness their profound religious sentiment.

The coming of general Augusto Pinochet's military regime in 1973 did little to favor the Huilliches for they took a dim view of indigenous communities being consolidated against the backdrop of a repressive, antidemocratic apparatus. The Indian ringleader Huencheo was among those taken to the fearsome National Stadium, in Santiago, where the political prisoners were herded. At the most this new government would favor the granting of lands individually, but never as a community. With the usual government spirit of never solving a problem, in what the natives viewed as an act of supreme brazenness, the National Property Ministry suggested the Huilliches should purchase the lands they occupied, as though those lands had not belonged to them forever. Therefore, nothing could have been better for the military government than to split up these estates and undermine the power of the caciques resurfacing once again after having disappeared during the 1940s. It was an unbelievably complicated survey system, with dozens of properties wiped out, like the Huaipulli estate that was divided into countless small plots. Some suffered less damage, like the Coigüin estate, in Compu, the throne of which is now occupied by don Carlos Lincoman.

I once more made my way there, along road 5, not for another interview with Lincoman, but to see an anthropologist who, according to certain versions I had heard, is the ideologist of the Consejo General de Caciques. Manuel Muñoz – the anthropologist – is also a Huilliche descendant and is the factotum at the Center this institution owns on a hill close to the cacique's home. I had spoken to Muñoz several times on the phone, but there always seemed to be some deterrent to our encounter, until he at last agreed to meet me at Compu.

The Center is, needless to say, made of timber and has a rudimentary auditorium with bleachers, presumably for the Council meetings. However, the stage and characters on the first floor were something different. Muñoz was a man not yet forty who, though displaying clearly indigenous features, dressed and spoke more like a European intellectual than a restless, diligent Chilote ideologist. I was surprised to find that on the first floor of the building there were several rooms with a single bed, for this was neither a hotel nor a shelter. We sat down close to a window overlooking the marsh, and the table between us might well have been a barrier rather than a useful piece of furniture for depositing objects. My host spoke in precise, polished terms, rich in conceptualizations, though he avoided any eye contact. He was smoking, but, perhaps in an effort not to contaminate the environment, held the hand holding the cigarette outside the window.

"Chilean society has a severe conflict as regards accepting anything indigenous in nature," he assured me. "People would like to see them in reservations, or as tourist guides. There are a lot of Indians in Chile who occupy important posts, but there is always racial or social discrimination. Believe me if I say this country has a problem in accepting its "darker side".

Muñoz clings to ancestral rights, perhaps convinced they will some day recover them. He speaks of eight hundred thousand hectares in Chiloé – which he holds is what belongs to the Huilliche people – as though this were simply a few acres of land, and as though he had all the documentation required to miraculously return these lands to the natives. And how was this happy ending to be achieved? In the national and international courts of law. His argument, rather than naïve sounded like some kind of absurdity, as though this incredibly large amount of officially registered lands on the archipelago, lands required to pay taxes, lands where investments had been made, and where powerful fishing, salmon and timber industries did brisk business, would, at the drop of a hat, or under an entirely idealistic decree, be returned to the Indians. Though I pointed out to him that international courts of law cannot rule in Chile simply because

of a question of jurisdiction, Muñoz feigned oblivion of this obvious fact. With baffling allusions to the Chilean Civil Code, the laws of Castile, and positive right – all of which he feels to be ineffective in this connection – he refers to the relationship between the Spanish and Chilean states: if there is a third party suffering the consequences, which would be the case of the Huilliches, there should be a recourse in international law. In which case, the thirty-one communities in the Consejo General de Caciques would be amply favored.

But the fact is that a large part of Indian territory is in the hands of foreigners, at least as far as title rights are concerned, and to believe that any prospective national or international edicts will return the lands to their rightful owners is no doubt a supreme case of wishful thinking. The fight between Huilliches and foreigners seems to be condemned to languishing in chronic stagnation: the former are unable to get the title deeds which would give them full possession while the latter are unable to evict them from the lands they are occupying. A short time back, for instance, Salomé Marie de la Taille-Trétinville y Larrain, the daughter and one of the heirs of the celebrated count – whose family still owns thousands of hectares in the Yaldad region, close to Quellón – unsuccessfully attempted to legally evict a woman who was occupying her lands.

“Anyone who tries to denounce or report appropriation of indigenous lands is lost,” warns Manuel Muñoz. “The Huilliches make use of the forest, and develop their territory, which is, actually, difficult to stake out because these are communal areas. It is not a question of evicting someone settled on a hectare of soil, but of evicting those who use the land, which is not the same.

In addition to this unbelievable tangle of documents and papers – or the lack of them – which no Chilean government has dared to solve, there is the covert civil war between the Consejo General de Caciques and the Federación de Comunidades Huilliches de Chiloé, which is a source of glee to non-indigenous proprietors. It is likely this latter, a newer institution, with its entirely novel approach to the problem, raises more of a threat to Lincoman and the communities in his charge than the foreign companies or the descendants of some French noble. Legal possession of land, attacks and counterattacks, roadblocks set up by the Huilliches are all part of a secular folklore, predictable and even easy to dominate. Meanwhile, Lincoman continues his feudal management of the Coigüin estate, without providing any explanations of incoming money or expenses, which is not wrong in itself, for there are numerous people working on these lands and living off them. Nevertheless, the administration is in the hands of a single person, and there are no small property-holders.

The Federación seeks precisely the opposite. It is not driven by any ancestral struggle, or claims over hundreds of thousands of hectares; its main aim is for small proprietors to be able to have the two or three hectares they own registered in their own name, and have the advisory services of an organization to help them in developing their projects.

Muñoz was disturbed by this philosophy.

The Federación relates to aided development, from an occidental perspective,” he pointed out. “There are no communities belonging to that organization that can demand a territory, because they have no links to it. In lacking these bonds, in not recognizing the personal authority of the lonkos or caciques, or the traditional issues around indigenous leadership and their territorial claims, or the Maestras de Paz<sup>1</sup>, they can hardly be recognized as authentic Huilliches.

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<sup>1</sup> Teachers of Peace, an ancient esoteric institution practiced by indigenous women and related to spirituality.



Manuel Muñoz finished smoking his cigarette, making sure the smoke went out the window. I mentioned my amazement at the number of single-bed rooms to which he responded that once a month this place is also a health care center, where a supplementary therapeutic model is developed with the aid of physicians resorting to Mapuche-Huilliche medicine. With barely concealed pride he explained that the medical system still practiced by native Indians in the south of Chile dates back thirteen thousand five hundred years. My mind went back, then, to my trip to Calén with Renato Cárdenas, when we stopped at a wooden bridge not only to admire the landscape, but also for him to gather some rare herbs growing in the murky forest undergrowth, and which were particularly suitable for certain illnesses. This unusual Chilote book of medical formulas and ancestral virtues is practically a secret science that can only be managed by the initiates, and that has become an excellent enhancement to allopathic medicine. However, I must confess I was perplexed when a young girl came in and interrupted our conversation to ask Muñoz about the timetables for the reiki practices she was doing there. It was hard to associate – ideologically, at least – a Japanese healing practice developed in the nineteenth century and focusing on body energy, essentially conveyed through a person's hands, to a Huilliche health center that claimed its healing methods were entirely their own and dated back over thirteen thousand years. I would have found it much more reasonable for them to provide therapeutic techniques handed down from some cacique who had lived in Chiloé in the remote past, than those proposed by Mikao Usui, Chujiro Hayashi and Ms. Hawayo Takata, inspired by the miraculous healings of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, both reiki and neuro-linguistics are tools irremediably associated to the nineties, rejected in the larger urban centers, only to be reborn in some Latin American cities as alternative therapies for HIV, prior to the advent of protease inhibitors, when those infected were simply left to confront the disease, for the only remedy available was from the AZT. This does not mean, however, that in some remote region of Chiloé they should not be in vogue.

Inevitably, globalization with its impact on traditions and lifestyles which have been entirely altered by the arrival of the salmon fisheries, salaries, cell phones and television satellite signals must have had some effect on an estate like Coigüin which, on the one hand, attempts to impose a cacique leadership system that is gradually losing its hold over time, and on the other applies therapies having little to do with what their ancestors once used. However, Manuel Muñoz feels no concern about these dangers.

“We have been under threat since the Europeans arrived in America. Today the Huilliches as a people are more alive than ever,” he warns, “and the best evidence of this is that, after five hundred years, they have still been unable to annihilate our people. We are not deceived by them today. We speak their languages, we know their way of thinking and we also know what they have in mind when they speak of progress. We have generated new insight to throw off the chains of captivity and, believe me, today we are more of a concern to them than they are to us,” he concludes defiantly.

To the inquiring eye of a foreigner, Chiloé has not lost its identity. Nor is it deprived, let alone primitive. In contrast to other places in South America, such as Peru, Argentina, Brazil, poverty goes unseen: there are no formidable slums with intricate labyrinths, a sort of paradise for drugs and crime. Nor are there stores selling junk food or exploding with the maddening noise of virtual electronic games. It is understandable Chilotes should feel that nothing ever will be the same since powerful industries captured their youth and carried them off to live in cities like Castro or Quellón; that

their minga, that spirit of cooperation among friends and neighbors when harvesting potatoes or relocating a home, should have waned. But they are no doubt unaware that this archipelago, mayhap due to its history, its remoteness and its beliefs, radiates an identity hardly altered, which makes it a rare gem in the southern Pacific. Insularity, a recurring issue – and complaint – among intellectuals, politicians and government authorities, has paradoxically favored Chiloé, keeping it – at least momentarily – from the afflictions of post-modernism. Cut off from the problems of large cities, without the invasion of profane tourism, the island can afford to be meek, but never poor.

The building of a bridge over the Chacao channel might very well become a lethal weapon, for it would bring to an end its condition as a cultural island, idyllic in its scenery. So far one should be thankful that the tourists coming to explore the archipelago, who can be seen in Castro around the Plaza de Armas, or those coming down off luxury cruisers, simply for a few hours, do not harm the island's identity. They are few and far between, and, if willing to travel thus far, surely possess the sensitivity required to grasp the immense wealth of this land, with its fjords, islands and cordilleras. There is no way to avoid differences, and they are many: whites and Indians; large and small estates; cacique leadership and development; Castro and Ancud; powerful enterprises and conservationist groups; peaceable islands and the craggy western coast. One might go on forever seeking differences and contrasts, or running down the weather, proverbially hostile. To a Chilote, these are everyday situations that have varied little over the years. To a foreigner, they are a joy, and once Chiloé has struck someone to the soul, the idea of never returning is intolerable, for there are images etched forever in their memories. Who could forget the road to Rilán, with those stark contrasts of light and shadow on a Sunday afternoon in spring? It is so much more than a postcard of Switzerland or Bavaria, precisely because of its insularity, its remoteness, its mythical essence.

A bridge across the Chacao channel might simply exterminate this culture.

It is understandable the Chilotes, who have defended their identity since the very first moment the Spaniards disembarked – despite the inevitable borrowing of some European cultural traits – should fear that a bridge, or the lack of an environmental policy, or perhaps the unrestraint among some of their youth, or even the permanent bombardment of messages leading to consumerism and certain types of behavior on the television, should lead to a progressive destruction of their culture. Though the following excerpt is not entirely applicable to the inhabitants of the archipelago given its extreme nature, it is worth reproducing some impressions recorded by Pedro Rubén Azócar – whom we met at his home in Quellón. This was written in the nineteen sixties, when he had returned to Chiloé and was already concerned by the changes in island identity.

*In the face of the lack of imagination or courage evinced by the two radio stations [meaning those in existence at the time] in showing what is improper or uncharacteristic – and I refer to Radio Chiloé and Radio Pudeto – one wonders whether we might not be condemning to oblivion everything we call our own, as happened to the Alacalufes<sup>2</sup> – who had something to do with Archipelago, for the sandy ground in the inner harbors has thrown up some of their dalcas<sup>3</sup> – when efforts were made to **civilize** them, by gathering them at Puerto Edén, constraining them to wear clothes that did not suit their particular way of protecting themselves from the elements,*

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<sup>2</sup> Nomadic Indians who inhabited the area to the north of the Strait of Magellan.

<sup>3</sup> Wooden boats.

*submitting them to eating habits entirely foreign to their reality and customs, reducing them to living in restricted living quarters, and thus denying their essentially nomadic condition.*

It is, undoubtedly, an exaggerated example. But this does not mean the Chilotes are not mistrustful of outsiders, or *afuerinos*, as they call anyone not belonging to the island. The Spaniards – *malgré* the Jesuits – not only conquered and subdued them, but also tampered with their beliefs by converting them to Catholicism, a religion they came to believe in and still continue to profess. Nor did the winds of independence that rustled through Chile in the nineteenth century solve a fundamental condition of their existence, their possession of the land, of those immense territories they continue to claim and which, as in the past, are still denied them. The advent of the large timber companies in the early twentieth century was another twist of the screw, more procrastination, involving further abuse and simply adding insult to injury. Today, the salmon fisheries steal away the young people enticing them with salaries unimaginable in the northern hemisphere, destroying the structure of peasant families and gradually undermining the subsistence economy that has historically sustained Chiloé.

It is unlikely reality will change for the people of Chiloé, with or without a bridge. For continental Chileans this will always be a picturesque archipelago, just the place for a tasty *curanto* stew, for local music festivals in February, for woolen caps and blankets, and an inexhaustible list of curiosities and common places that appear in the tourist brochures. One might also stop to wonder whether the Europeans, who, for that matter, do not flock to the place in droves, are capable of understanding what this culture is like. The language barrier and the inscrutability of the peasants make any attempt at an approach virtually impossible. This is not, of course, the case with anthropologists or researchers coming to Chiloé, yet their view can never be but an incomplete vision of such a powerfully rich scenario, impossible to interpret in its entirety. For this is not some remote community in Africa or in Melanesia, geographically hard to access, and rudimentary in culture; on the contrary, just as the ships entering the Magellan Strait from the east came upon Chiloé as a compulsory port of call, Europeans, Americans or Canadians are also required to pass through it after visiting Tierra del Fuego and the channels and glaciers in the Chilean Pacific. Unfortunately, however, they come only as passengers in transit: there are no more than a few who stay on and attempt to penetrate this richly layered region, so profuse in history and myths.

Yet Chiloé still endures, despite the Spaniards, despite globalization and tidal waves. It is within reach of anyone willing to seize it. Its oft-mentioned insularity cannot prevail in the face of imagination, or yearning for insight and understanding and, above all, the awesome wonder of being confronted with a unique world beyond compare, without parallel in the entire planet.

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